

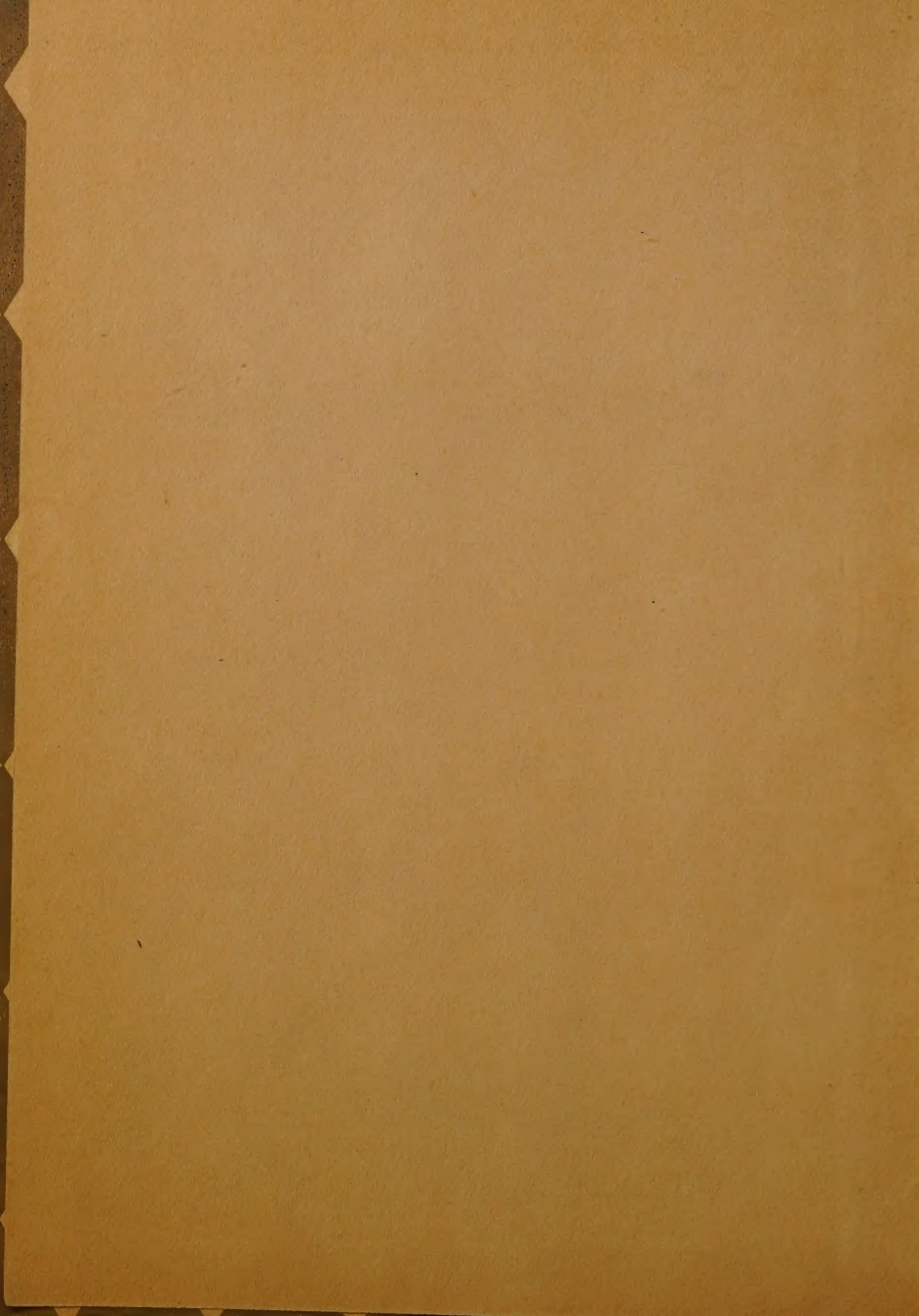
The Case of the Painted Dragon

A BRAINS BENTON MYSTERY











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A BRAINS BENTON MYSTERY

By George Wyatt

Based on the characters created by

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GOLDEN PRESS • NEW YORK

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The Hunter's Prey

I FELT my throat tighten. I was having trouble with my breathing. In fact, I don't think I was breathing at all.

The man at the wheel of the black car spoke again. "Hey! You two kids! Come here!" he said. And, brother, he meant it.

Me? I couldn't have come any closer if I'd wanted to. It felt as if my knees were in plaster casts and little men in spiked shoes were running up and down my spine. The strange man had a hatchet face and a mouth like a thin, cold slash. The upper half of his face was covered by a pair of big sun goggles—the kind aviators wear. I could tell my partner was scared, too, but he didn't freeze up the way I did. He wheeled his bike up to the window of the car.

"I'm looking for a Jap kid," said the guy with the goggles in a sort of confidential way. He had a voice like a rusty file. "You know any Jap kid lives around here?"

It was a crazy question. My partner snapped a look at me. It had him stumped, too. "You mean . . . a *Japanese* boy?" he asked, sort of fumbling for words. He was stalling, trying to figure out what the stranger was driving at.

"Yeah," rasped the man, "a Nip kid about your age."

"Sorry," answered Brains Benton, stiffly. "I'm afraid I'm not acquainted with anyone of Japanese ancestry." Brains hated to hear anybody use words like "Jap" or "Nip."

The man in the goggles never even bothered to say "thank you." The car growled off down the street like a big black cat,

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leaving the two of us staring at each other. Brains' eyebrows crept upward, as though they were trying to join the bright-red hair on the top of his head.

"Well!" he said.

I knew what he meant. For weeks, we'd been sitting around, gnawing our fingernails, waiting for some action. To keep from getting stale, we'd even been holding daily shadowing practice and sending each other dummy code messages. We'd been haunting the police station and the *Crestwood Daily Ledger*, hoping for something to turn up. It was a first-class business recession—in the crime business, that is. Now, unless we'd just dreamed that creepy stranger in the goggles, the Benton and Carson International Detective Agency was about to go into high gear again.

That's right. I said "International Detective Agency." And if you think we're just a couple of knot-heads playing cops-and-robbers, you couldn't be more wrong. I've got a scrapbook jammed with clippings from the *Ledger* to prove it, too. You'd get a real boot out of some of the headlines they gave us:

YOUNG SHERLOCKS TRAP COUNTERFEITERS!

JUNIOR SLEUTHS FOIL CIRCUS FRAUD!

THIEVES UNMASKED BY KID HAWKSHAWS!

Don't get the idea I'm blowing my own horn. All I want to do is get the record straight about our being real detectives. To tell the truth, Brains deserves most of the credit for solving those mysteries. He's the President and big wheel of Benton and Carson, and does all the masterminding. Me? I'm James MacDonald Carson, Secretary-Treasurer of the agency and its general odd-job man. I do the leg work, like getting fingerprints, shadowing suspects and rounding up evidence. I'm just right for the job, too, because I look kind of average.

I have brown hair, brown eyes, a round face and a few freckles—but not enough to really notice. I'm just about the same weight and height as a hundred other kids you might know.

Brains Benton is something else again.

Brains (whose real name is Barclay Benton) is a tall kid, thin as a string bean, and he wears glasses. Most guys that look like that would be called "Stretch," or "Specs," but the kids nicknamed him "Brains" and the tag fits perfectly. That long drink of water has an I.Q. big enough for three wizards. Being smart comes naturally to him. You see, his dad is a professor at Crestwood College. His mother is a top-notch painter and she teaches art at the college.

I've known Brains for as far back as I can remember. We're about the same age and we're in the same class at school. But we really became best friends when we discovered that we both were interested in mysteries and criminology. That's when we started the Benton and Carson Agency.

I've already mentioned Brains' bright red hair. It's the color of a four-alarm fire.

His eyebrows were still up in the stratosphere and his blue eyes were popping behind his glasses as we stood there in the street. "*Well*" Brains said again.

We turned and looked after the big black car. It was just pulling up near another couple of school-bound kids, when a green-and-white patrol car from the Crestwood Police Department came out of Vine Street and turned north on Washington Avenue. Suddenly, the stranger's car took off and slipped into Vine like a jet-propelled panther.

Brains and I looked at each other again. "It would appear, James," he said with a thin-lipped smile, "that we have a mystery on our hands at last."

We started toward school again, wheeling our bikes.

"You could be right," I said. "But, I don't know. After all, all that guy did was ask us for some information."

Brains looked at me as if I had two heads. "If you were a stranger trying to locate someone in town, wouldn't you inquire at the post office, or maybe at Police Headquarters?"

"You've got something there," I admitted. "But from the way that guy took off when the prowler car showed up, the police were the last people he wanted to see."

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"Precisely, Jimmy! Whoever that man is, he doesn't want to attract the attention of the authorities. That's why he's trying to get his information from school kids. And then there are those goggles . . ."

"Lots of drivers use them to cut the glare of the sun on the road," I interrupted.

"Yes, notice the terrible glare here on Washington Avenue at eight-twenty in the morning," Brains said sarcastically.

I looked around. Tall elms lined the street for blocks in either direction. It was mid-April and the leaves weren't fully out, but even so, the early morning sun was having a hard time getting through into the green gloom under the trees.

"You win," I said. "But then why the sun glasses?"

Brains frowned. "Perhaps he wore them to avoid being recognized, or to make sure no one can identify him at a later date."

"This Japanese kid he was looking for," I said. "You think he wants to harm him?"

"That is a distinct possibility, Jimmy," was the reply. "But frankly, I don't know if there is such a boy. There hasn't been a Japanese family in Crestwood since Mr. Yamada and his wife were killed in that accident a year ago."

Mr. Yamada!—I'd forgotten all about him till now. He'd been the art teacher at our school. He wasn't one of those "inscrutable Orientals" you're always reading about. He was a swell guy with a ready grin. He was the coach of our swimming team too, and he was working up a water-polo tournament when he was killed in that auto wreck together with his wife.

"No, I don't think the Yamadas enter into this at all," remarked Brains. "I don't remember their having a son."

"So where does that leave us?" I asked. "Let's say we have a case. What's our next move?"

"Getting to school," said Brains, glancing at his wrist watch. "The late-bell rings in five minutes and I want to have a look at the excavation for the new wing before we go in."

As we jumped onto our bikes and headed for school, I could not get that guy in the black car out of my mind. What did he want? And those goggles! Just thinking about them sent shivers running up my backbone again. I tried to imagine what his eyes must have looked like. I decided they'd have to be like a shark's, if they were going to fit that thin, cold mouth.

Creeps!

We hopped the curb in front of the school and crossed to the high, board fence around what used to be the south lawn. They were digging the basement of a new wing for the school there now and down in the hole a couple of bulldozers and a steam-shovel were snorting away. We stared at them for a minute and I could tell Brains was way off in orbit somewhere. He had that glassy look. He was puzzling about the stranger, too.

Then my eyes bugged out. On the opposite side of the pit stood none other than "Horsey" Peters, our principal. If you could see him, you'd know why we called him "Horsey." He usually looked as if he should be saddled and bridled. This morning, though, he might have been one of Crestwood's ten best-dressed men. He even had a carnation in his buttonhole. And to judge from the expression on his face as he gazed into that giant hole, you'd think he'd dug it himself.

"Brains! Look!" I hissed. "Horsey's dressed fit to meet a king."

Brains answered back just as though his mind hadn't been a thousand miles away. "No, not a king," he said, "the new County Superintendent of Education. He's coming to visit the school today. That's why we have the afternoon off."

Gosh! I'd been in such a stew about that strange man, I'd forgotten all about the half-holiday. That would mean an extra-long practice session for the baseball squad.

"Mr. Peters will be anxious to make a good impression on Mr. Backus. Hence, the new suit and the carnation. Now, if we're not going to make a bad impression on Mrs. Clopake, we'd better move. The late bell rings in one minute."

We had to go around to the back of the school where the

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bike racks were. We almost made it to class on time. I didn't ask Brains what he thought about the man with the goggles or the Japanese boy. He had that glassy look back again and I'd learned that there was no sense trying to get an answer while the gears were still spinning.

The late-bell rang as we dashed up the stairs.

It happened that Brains and I took most of our classes together. Our first one in the morning was English and Mrs. Clopake was the teacher. She was a little bird of a woman, about fifty-odd—and getting odder all the time.

As Brains and I walked in the door she chirped, "A diller a dollar, a ten-o'clock scholar! What makes you come so soon?" She was always quoting bright sayings and proverbs. The class giggled and she couldn't resist another one: "Better late than never, I suppose."

Brother! Brains and I sort of smiled our apologies and took our seats in the row alongside the windows.

As I said, Mrs. Clopake was like a little bird, and she always flitted from subject to subject. So after a while my head started to whirl, and I guess I lost her. To tell the truth, I just couldn't get interested in Shakespeare that day. I kept thinking of that sinister stranger with the goggles. Who was he? Who was the Japanese kid he was looking for? Why did he want him? Why did he run from the prowl car? What kind of dirty work was this creepy character up to? Did it add up to a new case for Brains and me?

I should have had my mind on the lesson because all of a sudden I realized that Mrs. Clopake had called on me to answer a question.

Answer it? Heck! I didn't even know what the question *was*. All I could do was stand up, stare out of the window, and look foolish.

And then suddenly I wasn't feeling foolish any more—I was too scared to feel anything! That big black car was out there, moving slowly down the street. I saw the guy at the wheel too! He had those big dark goggles focused right on me!

It was weird! I had the horrible feeling he was looking for *me*. Right then the unanswered question didn't mean a thing. I just stood there with my lips moving but not making a sound.

"What is it that fascinates you outside the window, James?" chirped Mrs. Clopake. She wagged her finger at me. "Remember, curiosity killed the cat."

Creeps! Of all her witty little proverbs why'd she have to pick that one? I could just feel the icicles forming in my veins.

"Very well, James," she twittered, "I'll put you out of your misery. You may sit down."

I sat, but believe me I wasn't out of my misery. The thought of that guy with the goggles prowling outside the school had me twitching. The bell at the end of the period sent me shooting out of my seat as if I'd been stabbed.

Brains grabbed me. "Steady, Operative Three!" he hissed. "What was it you saw outside?"

When Brains called me Operative Three, I knew right away that he had figured something out—a lead, maybe, that we could follow. You see, whenever we are really working on a case we use code names. I'm Operative Three. Brains is X. There is no Operative Two.

I told him what I'd seen and he leaned over to look out the window. "Well," he shrugged, "if that stranger was out there he's gone now."

I followed Brains out into the corridor. "What do you mean —if he was there?" I protested indignantly. "I saw that black car, I tell you."

"Quiet, you idiot!" Brains muttered in my ear. "Must the whole student body know our business?"

I gulped. I'd forgotten we were in a corridor jammed with other kids heading for their classes.

"Anyway," whispered Brains, "stay on the alert for a Japanese boy! If there is one in town he may be attending this very school."

Of course! The Japanese boy! I kept my eyes open trying to spot a face that looked Oriental.

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I followed Brains into our math class. But believe me math was the last thing on my mind. It was that mysterious stranger I kept thinking about. I still twitched every time I remembered the way those black goggles had focused on me from the car. Brother!

Once, my math teacher, Mr. Cummings, called me up to the blackboard. I went the long way round so I could rubberneck through the window. Mr. Cummings gave me a fishy eye and said, "Carson, the shortest distance between two points is a *straight line*."

Everybody laughed—except me. All I could do was swallow hard. *I'd caught another look at that black car.*

I told Brains about it at the end of the period. We hurried to one of the windows on the stair-well. Actually, you're not supposed to loiter on the stairs. But Brains opened a book on one of the window sills. That way, anybody would think he was explaining something to me. But every few seconds he sneaked a look out of the window.

"You're sure about that car, Operative Three?" he muttered. "He's nowhere in sight now."

I didn't like the way he kept doubting me and I was about to tell him off, when suddenly we heard someone clearing his throat behind us. We snapped around. Horsey Peters was frowning down at us.

Actually Horsey was a pretty nice guy, but he did enjoy being the principal. And he got a real boot out of laying down the law. Like now!

"See here, boys, you know the rule about loitering on the stairway. Just what is it that interests you out that window?"

I was trying to figure out an answer to that one when Brains took over. "We were examining the meteorological phenomena," said Brains, solemnly. "I find the rapid accumulation of strato-cumulus clouds, and the absence of solar radiation presages an increased rate of condensation. We may expect a vertical precipitation of moisture at any time."

I stood there with my mouth open, wondering what Brains

was talking about. Old Horsey had a dazed look on his face too, so I could see he didn't know what this was all about, either.

Finally he spoke in a strangled voice. "I do believe you're right, my boy!" Then he headed down the stairs to his office. He was shaking his head as if to clear it. I had an idea it would take him quite a while to get over this.

"Creeps," I said, as Brains and I headed for our next class, "What was that mumbo-jumbo all about?"

Brains' smile was sweet and innocent. "All I said was that it was getting cloudy and it looked like rain." Yep, as I have said so often, Brains Benton could handle just about any situation that came up.

Our next class was science—one of my pet subjects, but all through the period I kept looking out of the window trying to spot the black car. But the windows of that room face the athletic field in back of the school, so all I got out of the deal was an extra homework assignment from Mr. Shane for not paying attention. I could see this wasn't going to be my day.

By the end of the period I was wound up like an alarm clock. Brains and I pushed our way through the crowded corridor and ended up at the stairway window again.

Brains said, "Operative Three, you look as if you need a sedative. Are you *sure* you saw that stranger with the goggles again?"

"Don't treat me as if I was a mental case!" I exploded. "I tell you I saw him twice, even if you didn't. He's still out there somewhere looking for that Japanese kid."

"Ah yes, the Japanese boy!" muttered Brains, reflectively, as he eyed the kids pushing past us on the stairway. "I've checked everyone I've seen in the corridors. There's no sign of him!"

That's when it hit me. "X," I wheezed, "maybe they aren't really looking for that kid. The whole story could be a cover-up. Maybe it's *us* that guy is really after!"

"You're in worse shape than I thought, Operative Three," said Brains. "Why should anyone be after us?"

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"How can you ask that?" I protested. "After all the criminals we've put behind bars? I tell you that guy with the goggles is here to eliminate us! I'll bet he was sent by Otto Gruber, that crook we caught trying to steal the circus."

"I doubt it, Jimmy," Brains said. "Remember Gruber was deported."

"Well, maybe, it was Devlin, that counterfeiter we nailed."

"Devlin will be in the penitentiary for the next five years," was the scornful reply.

Well, he could be right. Maybe the whole thing was a false alarm.

I was fighting hard to control myself, and I'd almost succeeded, when suddenly a long black car came cruising slowly down Washington Avenue!

I couldn't talk. The words wouldn't come. All I could do was poke Brains with my elbow and point.

Brains did a double-take. "You sure that's the car?" he said frowning. "It appears a bit different to me."

"It's the guy with the goggles all right! I'm sure it is," I groaned, even though I couldn't see the driver clearly. "Brains, I'm scared! Scared stiff! It's *us* he's after! I know it! We need protection I tell you. Maybe we ought to call the cops! Or tell Mr. Peters!"

"And just what was it you wish to tell me, young man?" said a hollow voice behind me.

I whipped around, scared out of my wits! It was Horsey Peters again. "Still observing meteorological phenomena?" he asked, sharply. We weren't going to fool him with *that* gag again.

Brains gave me the high sign to clam up but I was too jittery to listen. My nerves were shot! I hit the panic button!

"It's the guy in that car," I blurted, pointing into the street. The car was slowing down at the corner of Vine Street and preparing to make a U-turn. "There's a man driving it—a stranger! He's been cruising around the school all morning. I think he's after us!"

"Just a moment, Mr. Peters," interrupted Brains. "Jimmy's exaggerating this whole thing. You know what an overwrought imagination he has sometimes."

"This is more than imagination, Barclay," frowned old Horsey. "That car is coming back this way! By George! He's pulling right up in front of our entrance. Come with me, you two! We'll see what this is all about."

A minute later Peters was headed out through the main door with Brains and Yours Truly close behind. Brains was shooting me dirty looks but I didn't care. I was ready for the showdown.

The guy in the black car was about to open the door, but Horsey was so worked up he yanked open the car door first.

"Explain yourself, sir!" he snapped to the guy in the driver's seat. "How dare you try to intimidate these boys! Either you give me a satisfactory explanation or I'll—"

Horsey stopped, with his mouth wide open. The driver was climbing out of the front seat.

It wasn't the man with the goggles at all. It was a big, beefy guy with a red face.

"Mr. Backus," croaked Mr. Peters.

Brains and I exchanged looks. Mr. Backus was the new County Superintendent of Education! The fat was in the fire!

"I trust you have some excuse for this outlandish behavior, Peters," said the newcomer.

"It was a mistake," said Horsey in a strangled voice. "A ghastly mistake!" Then he turned on us. "You go to your classes at once. I'll deal with both of you later."

I felt like that French queen on her way to the guillotine.

We shot up the school steps like a couple of guided missiles. On the second floor landing Brains stopped and gave me a murderous look. "*Idiot!*" he said. "Couldn't you see it wasn't the same car?"

"Sorry, X," I apologized. "Guess I lost my nerve when the heat was on. How stupid can you get?"

"You have already demonstrated that," snapped Brains. "Now, quickly, we're late for history class."

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It was only then that I realized that the corridors were empty and the last period of the morning had begun. When we came into our history class old "Pumphandle" Mayhew was talking to the class, making chopping motions with his arm every time he made a point—which is why we called him "Pumphandle."

"Glad you gentlemen could find the time to join us," he said. As we took our seats, he turned back to the class.

"And now is there anyone who can tell me when the battle of Yorktown was fought?" he asked.

A dozen hands went up, but old Pumphandle was a smart apple. He always seemed to know who hadn't done his homework.

"Martin Wagner," he called. A husky kid got up in the first row and shuffled his feet. If anyone had to be trapped on that question it couldn't have happened to a more deserving guy than "Tuffy" Wagner. He was a big overgrown guy who liked to throw his weight around.

Anyway, Tuffy was in a spot. He didn't have the answer so he just stood there with his mouth open, scuffing his feet.

Pumphandle made a little mark in his notebook and then said, "Very well, we'll try someone else." His eyes stopped at the third seat of the first row. "How about the newcomer in our class? Think you know the answer, Mikko?"

Mikko. That was an odd name for a kid to have. I craned my neck to see what he looked like. From the back I could see he had black hair and was a little shorter than average. There was a kind of golden color to his skin. Then he turned and I saw his face.

Brains and I snapped a look at each other. Creeps! We'd found the Japanese boy at last!

CHAPTER TWO



Mikko

FINDING that Japanese boy kind of took the wind out of my sails. It was like finding the little man who wasn't there.

Standing at his seat Mikko answered Pumphandle's question in a sort of sing-song voice. "The battle of Yorktown occurred in the year 1781. The British were defeated. It was most decisive battle of war."

With a funny kind of bow Mikko finished and sat down. Creeps! With the language he used, he almost sounded like Brains Benton.

Mayhew looked over his glasses. "Thank you, Mikko," he said. "It's refreshing to find a pupil who uses his head for something more than just keeping his ears apart."

He was looking right at Tuffy Wagner when he said that and everyone laughed. Tuffy turned brick-red as he went into a fast burn. He shot a real mean look at the guys closest to him and they clammed up. Then he looked daggers at Mikko. Right then I could see that this new kid was in for a barrelful of trouble.

I thought that history class would never end. The second the bell rang I cut across to Brains' desk. He had that I-told-you-so look in his eye.

"So it seems there *is* a Japanese boy after all," he said, with a sidelong glance to make sure that no one else was listening. That superior smile on his face sent me into a slow boil.

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"All right," I snapped. "You pick up the marbles. But now that we've found that kid I think we ought to warn him about that guy that's looking for him—that character with the black goggles!"

Brains frowned. "You're right, Three! This Mikko is obviously in some kind of danger. It is our duty to notify him at once . . . Come! We'll probably find him in the main corridor. He just left the room."

As I said, our history class was in the last period before the lunch hour. But since we had a half holiday, everyone was heading for the lockers on the main floor. We followed the crowd.

We'd just spotted this boy Mikko opening the door of his locker when all of a sudden someone steamrollered past us, almost knocking me off my feet.

It was Tuffy Wagner! He had a poison-mean look in his eye and he was headed right for that Japanese kid.

Brains grabbed my arm and frowned. "It appears we are in for some unpleasantness," he said, and he was right.

Tuffy deliberately stumbled against Mikko. Then, with an ugly scowl he whirled and grabbed the smaller boy by his jacket.

"Watch what you're doing, kid," gritted Tuffy, as he hoisted Mikko up on his toes.

Tuffy was twice Mikko's size, and bullying smaller kids was a hobby with him. But this kid Mikko didn't seem to scare easily. He just looked at Tuffy with a kind of puzzled expression as if he'd never seen that kind of animal before.

"Permit me to apologize if my clumsiness has inconvenienced my honorable classmate," said Mikko calmly, with a little bow. You got the idea he wasn't anxious for a fight but he wouldn't duck one if Tuffy forced it on him.

The cool way Mikko took it was too much for Tuffy. "Wise guy!" he growled. "You trying to make a monkey out of me?"

"You're doing an excellent job of that yourself, Tuffy," interrupted Brains, trying to get between the two boys.

Tuffy snarled. "You stay out of this, Benton. I'm going to teach this little squirt a lesson."

That's when Tuffy swung. Tuffy is a hefty kid and he outweighed Mikko by a good thirty pounds. That punch would have knocked Mikko silly—if it had landed!

But it didn't! Because all of a sudden Mikko moved forward and ducked! Tuffy's hand slammed right against the steel locker! *Wham!*

Brother! You should have heard Tuffy yell and go into a war dance with his sore hand. There wasn't a kid in that corridor that felt sorry for him, either.

"Engrave this occasion in your memory, Jimmy," remarked Brains, solemnly. "You have just witnessed an instructive lesson in science."

"A lesson in science? What are you babbling about, Brains?"

Brains chuckled. "You have just seen a perfect example of the irresistible force meeting the immovable object . . . Come, I want to speak to Mikko before he leaves."

We caught up with Mikko as he was going out through the door. Walking over to the bike racks, Brains introduced himself and me and added, "I just wanted to assure you that not everyone here in Crestwood is like Tuffy Wagner. We'd like to be your friends, Mikko."

Mikko grinned, his face lighting up like a golden lantern. "I am most honored to accept your friendship."

Maybe it sounds corny, but, somehow, the way he said it, and the little bow he made afterward made me feel kind of warm all over.

"And don't worry about Tuffy," I assured him. "He's just a big bag of wind and—"

"Speak of the devil," hissed Brains. "Look who's coming."

I turned to look. It was Tuffy! He came charging down the stone stairway. His face was red and his fists were clenched. He was heading straight for Mikko.

"Okay, squirt, I'll fix your wagon, now! But good!" Tuffy was so mad his voice was a squeal.

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"Brains," I said, stepping in Tuffy's path. "Maybe we ought to—"

I intended to keep Mikko and Tuffy apart. But that little guy wasn't having any. He ducked around me and stood waiting for Tuffy.

Tuffy charged in low with his shoulders hunched. I'd played football alongside him and I'd seen him lunge like that before. Brother, when Tuffy hit the line he usually went *through*.

Creeps, I thought! This is going to be awful.

What happened *was* awful—For *Tuffy*! He slammed into Mikko like a freight train. The little guy fell backward with a funny kind of rolling motion, but he grabbed Tuffy's jacket as he went down. Then, in the next second Tuffy was off his feet and shooting through the air like a guided missile. Only instead of taking off he plowed into a boxwood hedge and then sat there with his eyes kind of blinking and out of focus.

As for Mikko—he hit the ground rolling and bounced up like a rubber ball. His hair wasn't even mussed!

"Holy hat!" I gasped. "Brains! Did you see that?"

"You may retract your eye-balls," replied my partner calmly. "Outweighed by his opponent, Mikko merely applied some well-known principles of jujitsu."

"Mikko," I asked admiringly, "Where'd you learn that stuff? It's terrific!"

There was that funny little bow again. "You are most kind to say so, Jimmy. In Japan, boys learn many sports. Jujitsu, tennis, baseball—"

"Baseball!" Brains snapped his fingers. "Mikko, if you can play ball the way you can wrestle you ought to go out for the school team. They're having regular practice this afternoon, if you want to come along. I'm sure Coach will let you try out."

"I will be most honored," answered Mikko, with that funny grin of his. Somehow I knew that this new kid was going to make a swell friend.

While we were getting our bikes out of the rack Mikko told us something about himself. He'd just arrived in America a

week before and he was living at 28 Madison Street, on the west side of town. That meant we could ride part of the way home together.

We were all yakking away as we started down Washington Avenue when I had a sudden thought.

"Creeps!" I said. "I wonder if that character Tuffy is following us."

I turned to look.

Something was following us, all right! But it wasn't Tuffy Wagner. *It was that big, black car!*

Seated at the wheel was the hatchet-faced stranger with the dark goggles! And he was grinning like a barracuda about to take a sample bite!



CHAPTER THREE

Desperate Game

TALK ABOUT being scared stiff! I was *paralyzed!*

Brains and I had been so wrapped up in that fight between Mikko and Tuffy that we'd clean forgotten the mysterious stranger in the dark goggles.

But he hadn't forgotten about *us!* Watching him at the wheel, I suddenly realized that I was on my bike, riding forward, but looking *backward.*

I snapped my head around. I had to swallow hard to keep from yelling a warning at Brains. Creeps! Hadn't he seen that guy behind us?

Brains seemed to be looking straight ahead as he talked to

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Mikko, but then out of the corner of his eye he flashed me a look and kind of shook his head a little.

It was the high-sign! He'd seen the guy in the goggles and was telling me to play it cool. I knew right then he had his next move all figured out.

Then, suddenly, Brains was smiling at Mikko. "Say, Mikko, did you ever play follow the leader?"

Pedaling beside us, Mikko blinked and grinned. "Follow the leader? Is that some kind of game?"

"It's easy and it's fun. All you have to do is follow the leader—and do exactly as he does. And *I'm* the leader."

Follow the leader! Of all the daffy things! Playing kid-games just when we were in a tight squeeze like this.

"Brains!" I began to protest. "For Pete's sake, have you lost your marbles?"

But Brains never heard a word. "All right, let's go!" he yelled.

In the next instant he was pumping his pedals like crazy and rocketing down the street, with Mikko right behind him. Creeps! What could I do but follow them?

Right then I realized what Brains was doing. He was trying to lose that car that was trailing us—as if we could possibly outrun that big black job. Good grief! There must have been three hundred horsepower under that hood.

But I should have figured Brains had something up his sleeve. Because when we hit the corner of Vine Street he made a hard right turn with Mikko and myself trailing him. I looked back and caught a glimpse of the black car. We'd caught that character with the goggles flatfooted. He was only just starting to pick up speed.

I figured Brains would shoot down to the next corner and make another fast turn there, but that red-headed genius was one jump ahead of me.

He made a turn, all right—right into the entrance of the Vine Street Garage.

As we shot in there Mikko had a big grin on his face. Heck! The kid didn't even realize what was going on. You could see

he was getting a big kick out of this new game Brains was teaching him.

But you should have seen the pop-eyed look on Mikko's face when Brains hopped off his bike and pulled us down behind a pair of trash cans!

It was right then that we heard the squeal of tires as the big, black car skidded around the corner and tore past the entrance to the garage.

"Brother," I breathed, "That was close!"

"The understatement of the year," commented Brains.

Mikko didn't say anything. He just looked at us as if our brain tanks needed a refill.

"Jimmy," said Brains. "Our actions must seem peculiar. Perhaps we'd better explain."

"Yeah! Perhaps you'd better explain at that," said a voice behind us.

We nearly jumped out of our skins. We turned around—Brother! What a relief! It was only Mr. Cripp, the garage mechanic. He was wiping his greasy hands on a rag and giving us a fishy eye.

"What do you kids want here anyhow?" he said suspiciously.

Brains was right on the ball. "It was an emergency, Mr. Cripp. We—er—needed some air for our tires."

Well, maybe it wasn't the whole truth. But it *had* been an emergency, you've got to admit *that*. Anyway, Mr. Cripp just scowled and turned back to the car he'd been working on.

"Okay," he snorted. "You know where the air hose is. Help yourself!" And then he mumbled something about how he ought to start charging for his air.

Well, Brains' fast thinking had managed to fool Mr. Cripp. But soft-soaping Mikko was something else again. As we rolled our bikes out into the street he spoke to Brains. "Excuse it please, but was that black car playing follow the leader, too?"

Mikko had a faint smile on his face, but from those bright button eyes of his I got the idea that Mikko didn't like anyone making a fool of him.

Right then Brains decided to tell him everything . . . about the black car and the guy with the goggles, and the way he'd been asking about a Japanese boy, and how he beat it when the police prowler came by, and how he'd been scouting the school all morning.

When Brains finished, Mikko's eyes were as big as soup plates.

"Think hard, Mikko," said Brains, tautly. "Could that man be anyone you know?"

Mikko shook his head. "You must excuse my ignorance. I am certain he is a stranger. The only persons I know in this country are Mr. and Mrs. Bevans—the people I live with."

Suddenly Mikko brightened. "Perhaps they would know about that man. I will speak to them."

"Oh, I wouldn't bother the Bevanses about it," Brains cut him off hastily. "It's not important. He's probably some kind of salesman—most likely he wants to sell you some insurance—or a magazine subscription or something like that. I wouldn't worry about it."

"Ah, yes!" said Mikko, smiling. "I was told about American salesmen. Most persistent. If at first they do not succeed, they try, try again."

Maybe Mikko hadn't been in this country long, but he sure learned fast.

By this time we were on our bikes again and about to turn up Chestnut Drive. Mikko braked to a halt.

"I'm sorry, but I must leave you here," he said.

"Oh, yes!" said Brains. "You have to go down Vine Street to get to number 28 Madison. Hmm. I know a shortcut."

"A shortcut?" asked Mikko.

"There's a shorter way," said Brains, patiently. "I'll show you." We rode down Vine Street with him to the corner of Tulip Avenue and then turned up to the alley halfway up the block. Actually that alley is a three-block-long driveway. Home owners on Chestnut and Vine use it to get into their garages from the rear.

"Just take this alley," said Brains to Mikko. "It'll save you about half a block. . . . And about the baseball tryout . . . Jimmy and I will call for you right after lunch."

"I would be most grateful," grinned Mikko and he headed down the alley.

That's when I turned to Brains. "Okay, mastermind! What's all this about the alley saving him a half a block? Good grief! It's more likely to take him a half a block out of his way. You're up to something, X. Come on and spill it."

Brains pursed his lips. "Perhaps I was stretching the truth a bit, but I did it for Mikko's protection. If my guess is right the man in the black car is cruising the streets, searching for Mikko at this very moment. By taking that back alley Mikko will probably get home without being seen."

Now you see what I mean about Brains being on the ball! You wouldn't catch me thinking of a bright stunt like that.

We headed up along Chestnut Drive toward the Benton house.

"That Mikko's a pretty bright kid," I remarked. "Do you really think we fooled him with that bit about the man in the goggles being a salesman?"

"I sincerely hope so, Operative Three. I'm afraid I alarmed him unduly by giving him too many details about the case. If Mikko were to discuss this with the Bevanses, they might call in the police."

"Well, what's wrong with that?" I asked. "Frankly, X, I get the willies when I think of that goon in the black car hunting Mikko down like a rabbit."

Brains looked at me as if I were something that ought to be swept under a rug.

"Operative Three, have you lost your mind? This is the first real case we've had in weeks, and *you* want to call in the police."

"You're right, of course, X," I said, feeling like a charter member of Fatheads Anonymous. "Guess I just didn't use my head."

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"I'm glad the morning's excitement hasn't upset you too much," Brains said scornfully. "You are your old self again."

We were wheeling up to the Benton house when I remembered something. "What about Mikko? We know he's in some kind of trouble—maybe even danger. We've got to find some way to keep our eyes on him—"

"Which is precisely why I invited him along to baseball practice," said Brains. "That way we'll be with him most of the afternoon. Should trouble develop, we'll be on the spot to take care of it."

Brains glanced at his wrist watch. "It is now exactly 12:17. You are to report to headquarters at 12:45."

Wouldn't you know it? There we were barely starting on a case and already he was giving me orders like a top sergeant.

"Okay! Okay! I'll be there on time," I grumbled, as I left him. He didn't have to tell me when to report. With a new case opening up, Operative Three would be ready for action on the dot.

I didn't waste a second getting home. When I got to the house I parked my bike and told myself to simmer down. Through the kitchen window I could see that my dad and my sister, Ann, were both home for lunch. Ann goes to Crestwood College, where Professor Benton teaches, and my dad is head accountant at the gas company. Crestwood isn't a very big town, so they get home for lunch pretty often. As I went up the back steps, I told myself to put the whole business of Mikko out of my mind. If Dad, Mom and Ann saw me all wound up, they'd start pumping me for information.

But when I sat down to lunch just what do you think they were talking about?

You guessed it. *Mikko!*

That's right. For the next half hour Mikko was the chief subject of conversation in the Carson household. It seems that my mother had just finished talking to Mrs. Anderson—a member of her garden club and one of the biggest gossips in Crestwood. That woman soaked up information like a vacuum

cleaner. Now she was spreading the latest dope about this new boy in town.

I sat there eating my lunch and getting an earful. If there's one thing you learn as a private detective, it's to keep your mouth shut and your ears open.

My first surprise came when I found out Mikko's father *was* Mr. Yamada, the man who'd been the art teacher at Crestwood. What was more exciting was that Mr. Yamada had served in Army Intelligence during World War II, and that after the war he'd continued working for the army in the Orient. Mr. Yamada had married in Japan, and that's where Mikko was born.

Yamada had been a Nisei—an American-born Japanese—so he had his son educated in an American school over in Japan. Then, a year ago, Mikko's parents had come to America, leaving him with relatives.

Mr. and Mrs. Yamada were planning to establish a home in the United States for Mikko so they could bring him here later. Then came that terrible accident and they were killed. Now, a year later, Mikko had arrived in America to complete the American education his father had planned to give him.

"Perfectly natural," Ann said. "After all, the boy's father wanted him to become an American citizen. But who's taking care of him while he's here?"

"Why, the Bevanses," replied my mother. "You see, the Yamadas boarded at the Bevanses' house while they were alive. They became close friends. Now, I understand, the Bevanses plan to adopt the boy as soon as legal proceedings can be completed. . . . They've always wanted a child, you know. Mikko will get everything he needs."

All the time mother and Ann had been gossiping, Dad had been sitting quietly at the table, working with some accounting papers he'd brought home with him. You'd never have thought he was listening. But now, all of a sudden, he spoke up.

"Bevans? Is that Omar Bevans, the insurance agent? . . . Strange sort. A joiner."

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"A joiner?" asked my mother. "What do you mean?"

"Joins all kinds of organizations," replied my father, making a few pencil marks on his paper. "Belongs to a dozen or more that I know of personally. Always at some crazy convention or other."

"Oh, Dad!" Ann laughed. "There's a perfectly logical explanation for it. He sells insurance. He probably joins a lot of clubs and lodges and things to meet more customers."

But Dad wasn't listening any more. He was wrapped up in his figures again. This was perfectly all right with me, because I wanted to get out of there before he remembered that the hedges needed trimming. I wasn't sure whether or not he knew about Mr. Backus' visit and the afternoon we were getting off from school. If he did, he might decide it was a good opportunity to put the Carson Estate in trim. Our house, there at 43 Maple Street, has a fair-sized yard with privet hedge on three sides of it. We'd had a warm spring and that hedge was already looking shaggy. Just thinking about it made my arms ache. I finished my lunch and sidled toward the door.

"Did you enjoy it, dear?" my mother asked.

I looked at her blankly. "Enjoy what?"

"The Spanish omelette, dear. I made it especially for you."

Spanish omelette! My favorite lunch—especially the way my mother makes it—with plenty of extra saucel! And I'd been so interested in that gossip about Mikko that I hadn't even noticed it.

Oh well, life is full of disappointments like that. Anyway, I had one satisfaction. Just wait till Brains heard all that inside information about Mikko. Especially the part about Mikko's father being an intelligence agent.

Creeps! I couldn't wait till I saw the look on X's face when he heard *that* one.

I told my mother about baseball practice that afternoon. She gave me an absent-minded okay and went back to her gossiping. Dad was so buried in his paper work he never heard me.

Minutes later I was on my way with my spiked shoes and fielder's glove clamped in my bike rack.

Our baseball coach was always complaining about my leaving in the middle of practice to go pick up my newspapers—I deliver for the *Crestwood Daily Ledger*—so I decided to stop by Stinky Greene's house and ask him to take my route that afternoon. That way, I'd be free to stay at the field all afternoon long and kind of make up for all the times I'd had to knock off early. I'd be a couple of minutes late meeting Brains, and he'd probably get off some crack about punctuality or something. But, gee whiz, I couldn't be everywhere at once. As it turned out, I was wrong—not about being late, but about what Brains would say. That was only one of the surprises I was in for at the lab.

When I got to the Benton house this time, I ducked up the alley that led to the garage at the back of the house. Many years ago, the rooms over that garage had been used as servants' quarters. But now Brains' parents allowed him to use the space for himself.

Most kids might have turned those rooms into a rumpus room or maybe a private gymnasium. But Brains had used them to build a secret research laboratory—with equipment that would make your eyes pop.

Very few people ever saw the inside of that lab. I was one of the lucky ones who did, because it had become the headquarters for the Benton and Carson International Detective Agency.

Back of the garage, I hid my bike under the tangled bushes that screened the wall on the north end. A quick look at the windows of the main house told me I hadn't been spotted riding in by Mrs. Ray, the Bentons' housekeeper. With the coast clear, I crouched down against the garage wall and counted along the row of nails on the bottom.

You had to find the right one. Only the third nail on the fourth board would do the trick. I found it and pushed hard with my thumb.

From out of nowhere came a mysterious whisper. "Your

name and business?" I'd heard the muffled voice from that hidden loudspeaker a thousand times, but it always gave me gooseflesh.

"Operative Three reporting," I hissed into a masked microphone. "On official business."

In front of me a hidden panel silently slid open. I stepped inside. Behind me the panel slid shut. Ahead in the dark I could see the glow of a blue light. A faint humming sound told me the secret staircase had unfolded and was locked in place. As I climbed upward, the humming note changed to a whine and I knew the staircase was folding up right behind me.

When I hit the upper landing I felt a small plate give beneath the pressure of my foot. Suddenly another panel swung open before me. I was in the secret laboratory!

Man! You never saw anything like it.

There were shelves crowded with transformers, resistors, amplifiers and almost every other kind of electronic equipment. You could look around and see enough power tools to run a small factory. Along the walls were racks of test-tubes, vials and bottles. A small printing press, a telescope, a tape recorder—you name it, Brains had it!

Don't get the idea Brains was the pampered son of rich parents. The Bentons gave Brains lots of freedom all right, but that red-headed wizard had built every gadget in that lab with his own two hands. He made it all out of stuff he'd picked up in garages, army surplus stores and junk yards.

As I stood there the lab seemed to be deserted. But I knew better than that. At the far end of the room there was a large two-way mirror fastened to the wall. Beyond that mirror was a small secret room—Brains Benton's inner sanctum. I'd have bet my shirt Brains was back there right then watching me.

I was beginning to wonder how long this routine would go on, when suddenly *the lights went out*.

I nearly flipped!

"Brains!" I yelled. "Brains, what happened? For Pete's sake, put on the light!"

There was no answer! Creeps! I was sure he must have blown a fuse with one of his crazy experiments.

"Brains! Where are you?" I bellowed.

There was no reply, nothing but silence and darkness all around me. I could feel the hair rising along the back of my head. A thousand crazy thoughts raced through my mind.

There was only one answer to this! Some stranger must have forced his way into the lab. He had done away with Brains.

And now he was after *me!*

CHAPTER FOUR



The Prowler

I WANTED to get out of there—*fast!* But which way could I go? Anywhere I'd turn I'd be sure to trip over something and break my neck.

"Brains," I begged pitifully, "have a heart. If you're in here somewhere, speak to me. Say something!"

Then, out of the dark came a hollow voice. "Follow me," it said.

It was Brains' voice! Talk about relief!

"Follow you," I protested. "Are you batty? I can't see a thing. I'd break my neck."

There was a chuckle beside me, so close I nearly jumped out of my shoes. "Control yourself, Operative Three, all you have to do is watch your step."

"But how can I watch my step when I can't see an inch ahead of me?"

"Sure you can. You're just not trying hard enough."

Well, I looked again, trying desperately to see something in the surrounding darkness. Then, in the next second, I wished I hadn't tried so hard.

Because right in front of me a footprint suddenly appeared—a glowing, shimmering footprint! Then another one, and another!

It was like watching a ghost walk! I could feel the hair curling right on my head!

"Brains!" I gasped. "For crying out loud, what's going on?"

There was no answer. Just that weird glowing trail of footprints in the darkness.

My mind was going into a tailspin. I was about to crack up when suddenly the lights snapped on. There stood Brains with his hand on the wall switch and a faint smile on his face.

"Relax, Operative Three. The experiment is over."

He sat down on a stool and began wiping the bottom of his shoes with a rag.

"Good grief!" I protested. "What was the big idea? You nearly gave me a heart attack!"

"Control your emotions, Operative Three. I was merely demonstrating the remarkable potentialities of certain luminous compounds."

I swallowed hard trying to calm my nerves. "Those footprints in the dark—how'd you do it, XP?"

"Elementary, old boy," he replied in his best Sherlock Holmes manner. He held up a jar. "I used a compound of calcium sulphide. The powder has a characteristic tendency to absorb light—and then give it off again in the dark."

"Well, isn't that just dandy!" I replied. "And what's it good for, outside of scaring people to death? You plan to frighten little kids on Halloween?"

"Operative Three, as a trained investigator you should see the possibilities this compound offers," Brains said loftily. "For instance, it might be used to follow the trail of a suspect in the dark."

"Well, yes," I agreed, seeing an opening, "If someone would hold the suspect down long enough for us to dust that powder on his shoes."

"Very funny, Operative Three," said Brains sarcastically. "You are most amusing this afternoon."

I cut him off. "Forget about this stuff, X. Wait till you hear the information I just gathered about Mikko."

Brains sat down and leaned back, putting his finger tips together in a kind of arch. "I presume you are referring to the fact that Mikko is the son of Mr. Yamada, our old art teacher. And that Mr. Yamada worked for Army Intelligence during the last war and afterward."

I stood there looking at him with my mouth wide open as he proceeded to rattle off all that inside information that I thought was so exclusive.

"Wouldn't you know it!" I said bitterly, when he finished. "Here I broke my neck making like Paul Revere to bring you all the latest dope. Where'd you get all that information, X? Creeps! Don't tell me you've invented a crystal ball?" (Frankly, it wouldn't surprise me if he did invent one some day.)

"It was all very simple," explained Brains. "While lunching in the kitchen, I overheard Mrs. Ray gossiping on the phone with Pearl, Mrs. Anderson's maid. All I had to do was listen and get Mikko's entire biography."

"Mrs. Anderson's maid!" I said as I saw the light. "It was Mrs. Anderson who gave my mother the information."

Brains nodded. "I foresee the time when that gabby Mrs. Anderson puts the *Daily Ledger* out of business."

"There's one thing that troubles me, though," Brains added, thoughtfully.

"What's that?" I asked.

"The fact that Mikko's father was an intelligence operative. That puts a completely different light on the entire case. That man with the goggles might be some kind of foreign agent—a spy searching for some secret message that Mr. Yamada left before he died."

Creeps! Now why hadn't I thought of that? It made a lot of sense the way X figured it.

Brains stood up and began pacing the room. "Operative Three, from this moment on we must be on the alert as never before. A spy is no ordinary law breaker. When cornered, he can be as deadly as a striking cobra."

He turned toward a shelf of books and took one down. "Most foreign spies are ready to use any means to accomplish their ends. I recall one story printed in this volume—"

As he thumbed the pages I caught a glimpse of the book's title. It was:

SPY AND COUNTERSPY

An Encyclopedia of International Intrigue

"Ah, here it is," said Brains, as he found the page. He looked up at me grimly. "In this particular case, a foreign agent used a most fiendish weapon to eliminate the man who had trapped him. A tiny spring gun, loaded with a glass sliver barely visible to the eye!"

"That small?" I said doubtfully. "How could a tiny bit of glass like that hurt anyone? He'd barely feel it!"

"That was precisely the idea," replied X, enthusiastically. "The victim was unaware of the attack until it was too late."

"Talk sense, Brains!" I protested. "A little sliver of glass!"

"This particular sliver happened to be dipped in Botulinus—one of the most deadly poisons known to man," said Brains, with scientific detachment. "The victim was dead within minutes. It was inevitable!"

Right there it occurred to me that maybe I ought to retire from the detective business and take a vacation trip—say, to Afghanistan!

"Brains," I wheezed, "I've just been thinking. Maybe this case is a little over our heads. How about calling in the F.B.I.?"

He turned rigid and looked at me as if I had suddenly suggested blowing up the old-folks home.

"Operative Three," he said slowly, with icicles forming on

every word, "we are trained investigators, fully capable of handling *any* class of criminal activity."

When Brains talks like that, you know he means business. There was nothing to do but give in.

"All right, you win," I said, holding up my hands in surrender. "You're calling the shots, X. What's the next step?"

Brains reached over to a nearby table for his baseball glove and spiked shoes. "Right now we'd better pick up Mikko. We promised to take him to the baseball tryouts."

"We've got plenty of time," I remarked. "The tryouts won't start till one-thirty."

"There's one thing you're forgetting," he reminded me. "While we're dallying here that mysterious man in the black car may have caught up with Mikko."

"Akki!" I choked. "What are we waiting for? Let's go!"

Seconds later we were out in the side alley. We grabbed a look at the back windows of the house to see if Mrs. Ray had us spotted. If she ever caught sight of Brains she'd find some errand for him to do, or put some other kink in our plans.

But we were in luck. There wasn't a sign of her. "She's probably inside listening to more gossip on the phone," commented Brains, as we hopped on our bikes and shoved off.

Madison Street was in a quiet neighborhood. When we hit the corner we could see the Bevanses' house where Mikko was living. It was a two-story brick building set back about fifty feet from the curb. A high privet hedge ran all around the property.

We leaned our bikes against a big tree at the curb in front of the house. We were heading up the walk toward the front door when, suddenly, Brains gasped, grabbed my arm, and yanked me down behind some kind of evergreen bush.

"What's the big idea?" I squawked.

"Quiet," he hissed. "Someone's looking in one of the side windows."

That really rocked me. I could see the whole front of the house. There was nobody but us in sight.



I was beginning to think it was a false alarm when Brains was up on his toes, cat-footing across the lawn toward a corner of the house.

He signaled me to follow. I did, with my heart pounding like a jungle tom-tom.

At the corner of the building he crouched down. I squatted behind him waiting for his next move. Slowly, carefully, he leaned forward and looked around the corner of the building.

From the way he tensed up I could see he'd spotted something. But who? Or what? He had my nerves quivering like plucked rubber bands.

Creeps! I *had* to see it—whatever it was!

I ducked around Brains and stuck my own head around the corner of the building. Then I saw him—a small, skinny man with a kind of squeezed-out shape, like an empty tube of toothpaste. He was standing bent over at a window with his back to us. If ever anyone looked fishy, he was it.

All of a sudden, I felt Brains yanking at my sleeve. I was too wrapped up in watching that prowler to find out what Brains wanted. Then I thought I might be crowding him against the corner of the building, so I wriggled to one side.

That's when I made my mistake—and brother it was a beauty! In moving aside I put my hand down right smack on the point of a sharp stone.

For one minute I saw stars. I had enough sense to keep from yelling but I did let out a big gasp.

That was all we needed. The guy at the window whipped around and caught sight of us. He had a ratty face and plastered-down hair, and somehow he looked like a jockey. His eyes were dirty gray. I remember that clearly, because they nearly popped out of his head when he saw us.

For one second he froze, and then he whirled and streaked for the hedge at the edge of the property.

"After him!" yelled Brains, and he took off. I pounded along behind him.

I figured that hedge would stop the prowler cold, but to

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my surprise he sailed right on over it as if he had wings.

I guess he made it look easy because Brains and I tried jumping the hedge, too. Only it wasn't quite as easy as it looked.

I play plenty of football and baseball but high hurdles are a little out of my line. Going over the hedge my feet caught in the branches. But the rest of me kept going, and there I was heading for the ground in a beautiful swan-dive.

I must have hit plenty hard. All of a sudden, there I was, smack in the middle of Fourth of July, with the most amazing fireworks display you ever saw going off inside my brain.

I couldn't have been out more than a couple of seconds because when I looked up Brains was still running, but the little guy we were chasing was out of sight. All I could see was a big black car zooming down the street that cut behind the Bevans house. Then the car vanished from sight, and Brains stopped running.

He walked back slowly. From the way his lips tightened, I knew he was plenty sore at me.

"All right," I said, "so it's my fault. I couldn't help it if I hurt myself on that rock."

Brains looked me slowly up and down. "Operative Three," he said, biting, "as a detective you are a fizzle. I wouldn't hire you to find a lost dog."

He pushed his way through the hedge. I followed him trying to think of some smart crack to even the score, but frankly, at that moment I didn't feel very bright.

We headed across the lawn toward the Bevanses' house.

"Brains," I said, "what about that black car? Was it the same one?"

"Undoubtedly. I spotted the man with the dark goggles at the wheel. He was waiting for that little man."

He pulled a small pad and pencil out of his pocket and began scribbling. "Yes, thanks to your bungling they got away—but not before I caught a glimpse of the license number on the car—or at least part of it."

I looked over his shoulder. On the pad Brains had scribbled: K-429.

"Anyhow," said Brains, "we've learned something from this incident."

"We have? Outside of half of a license plate number we don't know any more than we did before."

"That's where you're wrong, Operative Three," said Brains sarcastically. "We know now that the man in the goggles has someone working with him. We may be dealing with a gang—possibly a well-developed criminal organization."

We were walking along the wall of the house. There was a side door there, but we were heading for the main entrance in the front.

Then, in the next second, something grabbed my jacket from behind. I felt myself being yanked upward!

"Brains!" I yelled, frantically. "What's going on here?"

But Brains couldn't help me now. Because there he was *dangling in mid-air beside me!*



CHAPTER FIVE

Yama

IT TOOK all the nerve I had, but I managed to twist my head around and see what was holding me up there.

Brother, I was sorry I looked.

It was a man. Or at least he had arms and legs like a man. But you should have seen the size of him. He was built like a small mountain. He had muscles that threatened to split his

jacket at the seams. And he held Brains and me up in the air like a couple of insects wriggling on pins as he stared at us with glittering eyes.

That look was enough to frighten me out of ten years' growth. But I went into a positive panic when I heard his voice. It was like having a volcano explode right in my ear.

"What you boys want here?" Somewhere in that rumbling voice I heard a foreign accent. I couldn't make out exactly where it came from. Frankly, I didn't care.

I tried to answer him but the words wouldn't come. That man-mountain was looking at me like a cannibal about to sample his favorite dish.

Then, just as I was about to pass out from fright, I heard a voice yell. "*Yama!*"

It was Mikko. He was standing in the side door of the house, snapping orders to that man-mountain. I couldn't understand a word he said, but whatever it was, it worked.

The giant loosened his grip and put us down on the ground.

It was Brains who caught his breath first. "Good grief!" he said to Mikko. "Who's *that*?"

"Permit me to apologize," said Mikko. He was grinning now as he made a little bow. "I am pleased to introduce Yama. In Japanese the name means 'mountain.'"

"I can see why," said Brains, as he stared up at Yama.

That name fit this character like a glove. I'll bet he would have tipped the scales at over four hundred pounds. *If* you could have found a scale that wouldn't break under him.

Yama tried to smile at us. "Most pleased to meet friends of Mikko," he said. But he didn't sound as if he meant it.

"I regret unfortunate incident," said Mikko, as he led us through the side door into the Bevanses' kitchen. "But Yama saw you prowling about. He thought it most suspicious."

Behind us somewhere Yama grunted.

"There *was* someone prowling around," said Brains, "But I'm afraid Yama grabbed the wrong party." Then he told Mikko about the man at the window.

Mikko frowned. I could see he was worried now.

Yama must have understood what we said because he went to the kitchen window and stared out muttering to himself ferociously.

"He says he doesn't understand why they should be following me. It makes him very angry," explained Mikko.

Yama growled to show us how sore he was. It sounded like feeding time in the lion house at the zoo. The whole house trembled.

"Creeps! I pity those guys if he ever lays hands on them," I remarked.

Mikko nodded. "It would be most regrettable. Yama is an old family servant who is to stay here with me for a short time. In his youth he was a Sumo wrestler!"

"Sumo?" I asked, mystified. "What's that?"

Brains cut in. "Sumo is an ancient Japanese variation of wrestling that dates from the eighth century," he volunteered. "I understand it's still very popular in Japan. Contestants often weigh well over three hundred pounds."

You see what I mean about Brains being a walking encyclopedia.

"Hey," I interrupted. "We better get on the ball or we'll be late for baseball practice."

"Please accept my apologies. I had forgotten about that completely," said Mikko. He ducked into a hallway closet and grabbed his jacket.

"Don't you have to tell Mrs. Bevans where you're going?" I asked.

"Mr. Bevans is away on business," Mikko explained, as he slipped into his jacket. "And Mrs. Bevans will be out shopping for the rest of the day. If they should come home while I am away Yama will explain—"

There was a rumbling explosion of Japanese words from the other side of the kitchen where Yama was standing near the window.

Mikko turned to us. "Yama is worried. He feels I should not

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go out without protection. He insists upon coming with us."

We had to see it Yama's way. He was too big to argue with.

Brother, what a sight we made. The three of us on our bikes with that big Oriental man-mountain trotting behind us on the sidewalk. Crestwood citizens watched us go by with their eyes popping.

When we reached the municipal field, we sat Yama down on a bench on the sidelines. From the way that bench groaned I wondered how long it would last under his weight.

After that we trotted back to the school building and ducked into the entrance of the gymnasium locker room. Brains and I changed into our uniforms. Mikko didn't have any equipment but we managed to rustle up a glove and a pair of spiked shoes. Then we headed out to the ball field.

Mr. Savage was our physical training teacher and the school baseball coach. The way he greeted Brains you'd think he hadn't seen him for a year.

"Glad to see you, Benton, my boy," he said enthusiastically.

You bet your boots he was glad. Brains didn't look much like an athlete, but he was the best hurler in our school's history. Not that he cared for sports much, but pitching appealed to him as a scientific challenge.

That may be a whacky way of looking at it, but Brains Benton had won seven games last season, and lost none. And he'd set a new state record for strike-outs and scoreless innings, too. So now you see why the coach was so tickled with him.

"I suppose you're champing at the bit, eager for the new season to start, eh, Benton," said Mr. Savage.

"I'm more than ready, Sir," replied Brains. "I've been working on a new curve."

"Great! We'll try it and see how it works this afternoon."

"Oh, it will work all right," said Brains, confidently. He took a piece of paper from his pocket. It was covered with a dozen equations and formulas.

"You see, Sir," continued Brains. "I've calculated it mathematically for spin, velocity and wind resistance. It can't miss."

Savage stared at the paper with a dazed look on his face. "Yeah!" he said. "It can't miss."

When Brains introduced Mikko, the coach was still squinting sideways at the paper.

"From Japan, hey?" said Mr. Savage, brightening up. "They play a pretty good game of ball over there. What position do you play, son? We can use a good man at shortstop!"

And let me tell you Mikko was *good*!

You should have seen him field those pop flies and scorching grounders the coach batted his way! That kid was everywhere in the infield at once.

It looked like a great day for everyone. I speared three hot liners in right field and rifled a couple of beautiful pegs to home plate. As for Brains' new curve, it hooked like a jug-handle and had the batters breaking their backs.

But just about the time Mr. Savage blew his whistle for batting practice to begin I caught a glimpse of a car driving down Spruce Street on the north side of the field. Why a passing car should have attracted my attention, I'm not sure. Except that this particular car was big and black. And after what I'd been through that morning, any big black car would give me the jitters.

Right then though, nothing seemed more important than getting to the batting cage and taking my swipes at the ball and I forgot about it.

It was half an hour later when the coach's whistle broke up the session. We ducked into the gym and changed. Then we went outside again to pick up Yama.

But Yama wasn't there! The bench where we'd left him was empty.

We were still trying to puzzle it out when Mr. Savage passed us.

"If you're looking for that big fellah you came here with," he said, "he took off about half an hour ago. Went down Spruce Street toward Washington."

A half hour ago! Somewhere in the back of my brain I heard

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an alarm bell go off. A half hour ago was about the time I saw that black car heading east on Spruce Street!

"Brains, there's something I'd better tell you," I said, worriedly. I filled him in on what I'd seen.

Brains was frowning when I finished. "Jimmy, I'm disappointed in you," he snapped. "This could be a most serious development. By withholding such vital information you may have caused grave complications."

"Creeps!" I said. "Do you think Yama was tied up in some way with that guy in the black car?"

"Anything's possible," said Brains.

"Perhaps Yama just left for home," Mikko suggested. "I'll probably find him there when I get back."

"Mikko, I think we'd better come along home with you," said Brains. "With that black car still cruising the streets an escort would be most advisable."

Mikko swallowed hard. We didn't have to coax him. He was plenty worried by now, too.

"I would be most happy to have you accompany me," he said. We took off on our bikes. I don't know what kind of trouble Brains was expecting but nothing happened on our trip across town. We didn't see a sign of the black car—and that was all right with me.

When we got to the Bevanses' house Mikko looked relieved. "Everything seems to be all right," he said. "I have a key. I'll let myself in through the side door."

But Brains was already leaning his bike against the tree.

"There's something you may not have thought of, Mikko. Those men in the black car could have broken into the house. They may be lurking inside at this very moment!"

The way Brains said it made my hair stand on end. If anyone was lurking inside that house I was all for letting them lurk.

Mikko must have felt the same way because he swallowed hard and then said, "Perhaps we should wait out here until Mrs. Bevans comes back from her shopping trip?"

Brains looked at him reproachfully.

"There's no reason to be afraid, Mikko—Jimmy and I will be right there with you."

Wasn't it nice of him to volunteer my services? Why do I let Brains get me into these things?

"Come," said Brains, as he headed across the lawn for the house. "If there's someone inside we might as well know it now."

I didn't go for that "we" stuff, believe me, but Brains was already headed for the side door. And Mikko was right behind him. So what could I do but follow?

Mikko was taking out his key when suddenly Brains spoke up. "You can put the key away, Mikko, I don't think we'll need it."

He reached out toward the door. It swung open at a touch. And when I saw what had happened inside I nearly collapsed.

Brother, what a sight!

The Bevanses' bright, clean kitchen didn't look bright and clean anymore. It looked as if it had been hit by a small tornado. Every drawer, every closet door was open. Dishes, canned food and kitchen equipment were scattered all over the place.

"Creeps!" I said. "When did the earthquake hit?"

"The house must have been ransacked while we were away," said Brains. "Nothing seems to be broken. Whoever it was must have been searching for valuables."

Mikko didn't say anything. His eyes were as big as saucers as we followed Brains into the living room.

"Man," I said, "look at this place!" The furniture had been shoved aside. Drawers had been opened, table linens had been dumped on the floor.

"These were no ordinary thieves," Brains commented.

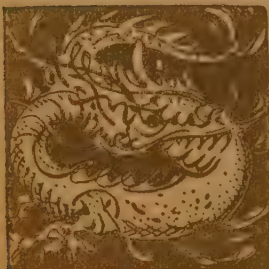
He pointed to an open drawer in a bureau. It was piled high with silverware. On top of the bureau was a beautiful silver tea set.

"Ordinary burglars would have taken the silverware. No . . . we can assume that they were hunting for something else."

"But what could it be?" said Mikko, anxiously.

Brains stared about the room. He had that bird-dog look on his face. You could almost see that high-powered thinking apparatus of his churning away. He was about to answer Mikko's question when suddenly he stopped stock still, and put his finger to his lips for silence, as if he were listening for some faint sound.

And then suddenly we heard it too. It came from upstairs. A rustling, scuffling noise. Then the creak of a floor board. There was someone in the house!



CHAPTER SIX

The Painted Dragon

MY KNEES started to cave in. I felt a flood of blind panic. I knew the others felt the same. Mikko was just standing there frozen, with his mouth open. Brains looked white and scared.

Silently, I signalled to Brains, motioning toward the kitchen door. I wanted us to get out of there—but fast!

But Brains wasn't having any of that. He shook his head and began tiptoeing toward the stairway that led to the upper floor.

I don't know what power that guy had over me. It must have been some kind of hypnotism, but all of a sudden I was following him, as if I were walking in my sleep. Mikko was right behind me.

At the foot of the stairs Brains turned to whisper in my ear.

"If we can catch him by surprise," he hissed, "we've got a good chance to trap him."

"X, there may be a d-dozen of them up there," I stuttered, my stomach in knots.

"Operative Three, if I didn't know you better I'd say you were scared. If there were more than one of them we'd hear them talking. Come, follow me and be careful . . . *he may be armed.*"

That last remark was just what I needed. As you can see, Brains was a real tonic for the nerves.

I would have left right then and there if I had any sense at all. But X was already on his way up the stairs. I couldn't let him handle it alone, could I? So, I followed him. Mikko was crowding me from behind.

Somehow we made the stairs without being heard. For a second we stood there on the landing, too jittery to move. From where we were, we could see several bedrooms. All those rooms showed signs of a hurried search. Clothes and bedding were scattered everywhere.

We could hear someone moving around somewhere down the hall. Mikko listened for a second. Then he tapped Brains on the shoulder to catch his attention. Moving his lips soundlessly, Mikko pointed toward an open doorway down the hall. We could see a moving shadow behind it. Then Mikko pointed to himself.

Brains and I got the message. It was Mikko's room!

Brains nodded sharply and then began to catfoot down the hall, beckoning us to follow him. We did. But believe me, my heart wasn't in it. As we got closer to Mikko's room, Brains plastered himself against the wall and inched forward sideways. Mikko and I did the same. I don't know about the others but if I could have melted into that wall I would have done it.

Then, seconds later we were crouched in the doorway looking into the room.

It was a shambles. Clothes, papers, books—everything was scattered over the bed and the floor. And right smack in the

middle of the mess stood the huge, hulking form of Yama.

At the sight of his servant Mikko kind of gulped and caught his breath. In the silence of that tense moment, even that faint noise sounded like an explosion!

For a second the big man froze where he stood. Then, he whirled and faced us. With hunched shoulders and outstretched arms, he looked like a gigantic tiger about to pounce.

All three of us stood there, frozen.

Mikko was the first one to break the ice. He wasn't scared or shocked any more. He just looked mad as blazes.

"*Yama!* What are you doing in my room?" he snapped.

Yama's eyes narrowed. Some big men give you the impression that they think slowly. But I got the idea that at that moment Yama's mind was humming like an electronic calculator.

When the big guy spoke at last, it was in Japanese. But Mikko came back fast.

"Please repeat that in English," he said. "And from now on you will speak only in English when we are in the presence of my friends. To do otherwise would offend."

Yama shot us a look that jolted me like a high-powered electric charge. I was waiting for him to lower the boom and flatten us all like so many pancakes. But instead, he dropped his hands to his sides and made a low bow.

When he straightened up, his face was a cold mask and his eyes had as much expression as two shiny black marbles.

"Please accept apology and permit me to explain presence in this room. As I watched baseball, I see car drive by. Black car . . . like boys say." He gestured toward Brains and me, and then continued. "I think maybe men in car see us . . . Go to house while we are gone . . . I come here, fast . . . But too late . . . Men already searching house . . . Run away . . . Leave everything like this . . ." He made a circular motion with his hands indicating the messed-up room.

For an alibi, it wasn't too bad. It could be true. After all I had seen that black car driving past the ball field. Yama

could have seen it too, and followed it back to the house, the way he said.

But Brains wasn't buying Yama's story—not quite!

"Maybe we'd better call in the police and tell them about this," he said, experimentally.

Yama's face went several shades lighter. He started to blurt something in Japanese—and then caught himself as Mikko gave him a sharp look.

"Please," Yama began again, in English this time. "Please do not call in authorities. Our gracious benefactors, Bevans family, would be most troubled. It would be most ungrateful to cause them distress. Besides, nothing of value has been taken!"

Brother, the scared way Yama was acting was a dead giveaway. He didn't want the police in on this at any cost. That was obvious.

But instead of pushing Yama any further, Brains dropped the subject right there.

"He's right," said X, thoughtfully. "There's no sense in worrying the Bevanses unnecessarily. Yama probably frightened those housebreakers so badly, they'll never come back here again."

Mikko frowned. "Mrs. Bevans will be home in an hour. We'll have to clean up before that."

Brains shot a look around the room. "We'll have to work fast! Jimmy, you and I will help Mikko straighten things out up here," he said.

"Yama, you go downstairs and clean up."

Brother, wouldn't that floor you? The way Brains snapped those orders out, he sounded like a general on a battlefield! It had happened before. There was something so self-confident about him sometimes that you just naturally did what he told you to.

Anyway, Yama headed downstairs without a murmur. Brains began to pick up some shirts from the floor. I tossed my baseball glove in the corner and pitched in.

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"Brains," I said, as we went to work, "something's bothering me. Yama's alibi just doesn't hold water."

"True," said Brains, "and his manner was most suspicious when I suggested calling the police."

Suddenly we were aware of Mikko standing beside us. Then it hit me. We were so interested in the case, we'd forgotten all about him.

Now Mikko's eyes were filled with questions—and he wanted answers.

"Brains! You mean you suspect Yama of all this?" He looked about him in disbelief. "But why?"

"Because we found him at the scene of the crime—for one thing," said Brains. "Then, there was that remark of his that nothing valuable had been taken. How could Yama know that unless he was involved in some way?"

Mikko sat down, a stunned look on his face.

"I understand your confusion, Mikko," said Brains, sympathetically. "Frankly, I'm confused too. The case grows more complicated by the hour."

"The case?" asked Mikko. "What case? I don't understand."

"There is most certainly a case here, Mikko," said Brains, beginning to pace up and down the room. "Consider the facts. That man in the black car who was trying to track you down all morning. Later, he tried to follow you home, but we lost him. Still later, his confederate was seen spying outside your window. Then we left for baseball practice and came back to find all *this*."

Brains paused, and then frowned impressively. "Mikko, something underhanded is going on here . . . There are definitely signs of criminal activity. You are the object of some kind of plot or conspiracy. Until we find out what lies at the bottom of this plot, your life is in danger."

Brains was really pouring it on now. Poor Mikko looked as jittery as a rabbit at a dog show. "But who can help me?" he asked. "Perhaps I'd better go to the police, after all."

Brains gave him a fatherly smile. "Why go to the police

when you already have the finest trained investigators in the field working on the case?"

"Trained investigators?" Mikko's head was spinning by now. He was ready for the finishing touch.

"I am referring to the firm of Benton and Carson," said Brains importantly.

He dug into his pocket, came up with a white card and handed it to Mikko.

Brother! You should have seen that card. It was a masterpiece, if I do say so myself. You see, I helped Brains turn it out on that printing press he'd assembled up in the secret laboratory. It read:

THE BENTON AND CARSON INTERNATIONAL DETECTIVE AGENCY CONFIDENTIAL INVESTIGATORS AND CRIMINOLOGISTS MODERN SCIENTIFIC METHODS AND DEVICES USED	
SHADOWING	FREE CONSULTATION
TRACING OF MISSING PERSONS	24-HOUR SERVICE
<i>President:</i> Barclay "Brains" Benton	<i>Secretary-Treasurer:</i> James "Jimmy" Carson

"You mean you are private eyes?" asked Mikko.

"A vulgar expression the general public often uses," remarked Brains, loftily. "We much prefer the title of 'criminal investigators'."

"Private eyes! I read lots of detective stories," said Mikko, enthusiastically. "I have a book about Sherlock Holmes—I have read it many times."

"Ah yes, Holmes!" said Brains, smiling a little. "I'm afraid Holmes would be considered outdated today."

"With our latest scientific methods," I interrupted, "Benton and Carson have left Sherlock Holmes far behind."

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Brains frowned as I horned in, but I didn't care. After all, as a partner in Benton and Carson I was entitled to get a word in now and then, wasn't I?

By this time Mikko was like putty in our hands. He was weakening fast as Brains pounded home the sales pitch. "Since you are a friend," he said condescendingly, "we might be able to accept the case at a reduced fee."

"Ordinarily we're booked for months ahead," I said, sinking in the hook, "but, at the moment, we happen to be at liberty."

"Well," said Mikko, "I'd like to hire you, but you see I haven't much money, and—"

"We quite understand," said Brains, tolerantly. "We will discuss our fee when the case is solved."

"I am most grateful," said Mikko, as he stood up and made a little bow. When he straightened up, his face was thoughtful again.

"I still can't believe that Yama is involved," he said, as he began to hang some clothes in the closet.

"He's one of our hottest suspects," I said. "After all, we did find him here with his hand in the cookie jar practically up to the elbow. The way I see it he may be tied up with those guys in the black car."

"I doubt it," said Brains. "As a servant, Yama could have searched this house without making this unspeakable mess."

"Then you think Yama's not mixed up in this deal?" I challenged him.

"No," said Brains, as he began to pile shirts into a drawer. "I suspect he's involved in some way, but I can't quite see how he fits in. Anyway, there are several other angles I want to investigate first."

He turned to Mikko. "I'd like to ask some questions about your father," said Brains. "I understand he was an Army Intelligence operative in Japan?"

Mikko's eyes blinked. You could see he was fighting back the tears.

"If you don't want to answer—" said Brains, hastily.

"No! I'll tell you what I know," said Mikko. "It isn't much. Army Intelligence work is most secret. I know there was much danger for my father. Look here."

There was a box lying where it had been dumped on the bed. A lot of medals had tumbled out of it. There must have been a dozen there.

"These were my father's," said Mikko. "He earned them before I was born."

I didn't recognize all those ribbons, but at least one of them was the Silver Star, so I knew that Mikko's dad had seen plenty of action.

"These medals are most precious to me," commented Mikko, as he began to replace them in the wooden box. "Mrs. Bevans gave them to me when I arrived here last week—together with the rest of my parent's possessions." He gestured toward some other stuff lying close by on the bed.

There was a mess of sketches and drawings on the bed. Mikko's father had done them. Mikko began arranging them. Brains and I helped. Most of those drawings were scenes of Crestwood and the school. I even recognized some of the people.

Suddenly, Brains straightened up with one of the drawings in his hand.

"Odd!" he said. "There's something strange about this drawing. It's completely different from the others."

I grabbed a look. It *was* different. All the others were sketches of small-town life here in Crestwood. But this one looked like an Oriental scroll—something you'd find in an antique shop.

It was a dragon—the fierce twisted kind you see on Oriental pottery. He had a jaw full of sharp teeth. But instead of scales he was covered with a weird assortment of multicolored warts, bumps, streaks and blotches. Under the dragon were a few vertical lines of Japanese writing. For some reason Brains was examining that drawing as if he had it under a microscope. Mikko noticed it too, and came over.

"Strange that you should pick out this picture, Brains," he said. "Mrs. Bevans tells me my father painted this dragon on the very day he and my mother—" He stopped and kind of choked up.

"I'm sorry!" Brains cut in. "I didn't mean to—"

Mikko shook his head. "It's all right, Brains. Back in Japan they have a saying—'Shikata-ga-nai.' It means, 'There is nothing one can do about it.'"

"This inscription," Brains said, pointing to the writing underneath the dragon. "Can you tell me what it means?"

Mikko studied the scroll, then said, "As near as I can translate it says:

'It is in the house of learning that one finds the secret of all things.

Words may vanish, but truth will remain.'"

"A gem of Oriental wisdom!" said Brains. He looked down at the scroll for a minute. Then he said, "It's as if—as if it held some kind of final message to help guide your future."

Brains was just handing the drawing to Mikko when we heard it. Out in the hall, beyond the closed door of Mikko's room, there was a faint rustling sound.

Brains' head snapped around. He signaled for silence. Creeps! The way my heart was jammed in my throat you couldn't have choked a sound out of me.

For long seconds the tension mounted. Then, just when I was about to explode with the suspense, Brains leaped for the door and swung it wide open!

The doorway was empty! Brains took a quick look-see in the hall and then came back.

"Nobody there," he said. "I guess it was just my imagination."

But he didn't fool me for a minute. From the squeak in his voice I knew Brains had seen *something or somebody*, out there.

"We must be going now," said Brains, trying to keep his voice calm. "Jimmy and I want to get started on this case . . ." He held up his finger. "A word of caution. No one must know

that we are working for you. Benton and Carson work best as undercover agents."

Mikko nodded. "My lips will be sealed, Brains. But how will I know if you've found out anything?"

"Our clients receive regular progress reports," Brains informed him, as we started to leave. "Don't bother coming down with us," he added. "We'll let ourselves out through the front door."

"All right, X, let's have it!" I said, as soon as we were outside. "Who did you see out there in the hall?"

"This is no place for a business conference," whispered Brains fiercely. "We may be under observation at this very moment."

As we hopped on our bikes, I snapped a look over my shoulder. I was just in time to see a living-room curtain drop into place. But for one horrible second I had glimpsed a pair of cold menacing eyes.

Yama!



CHAPTER SEVEN

Out of the Past

WE GOT OUT of there. *Fast!* When we turned at Oak Street, Brains slowed down. "Now about your question," he began.

"You mean about who you saw out there in the hallway? I can guess. It was Yama, eavesdropping. Right?"

Brains regarded me with fond amusement. "A good guess, Operative Three. You'll make a first-rate investigator yet."

I felt as if I'd just received the *Croix de Guerre*—with palms.

"Then, if he was spying on us, he must be part of the gang that ransacked the house," I said.

"I doubt it," said X, thoughtfully. "Here, let me show you something."

He braked to a stop and I pulled up beside him. Then he fished a sliver of wood out of his pocket. "I found this on the floor of the Bevanses' kitchen. A quick check showed me that it was torn from the door frame. The intruders jimmied that door open."

"So how does that clear Yama?"

"Yama had a key to the house," he replied, matter-of-factly. "He wouldn't have had to break in by force."

"That figures," I said admiringly, as we began to pedal down Oak Street. That's what I mean about Brains being on the ball. That redhead doesn't miss a trick.

"Wait a minute," I added, as a sudden thought came to me. "Then, you don't think Yama is mixed up in this whacky business at all?"

"I didn't say that," was the reply. "Yama's actions have been most suspicious from the beginning. Remember, we caught him searching Mikko's room. When we suggested calling in the police he almost panicked. And when I heard someone eavesdropping outside the door and looked out into the hallway, I'm sure it was Yama ducking into a room down the hall."

"Well, creeps! Then he *is* tied up with this case—but *how*?"

"When we know that we'll be well on our way to solving the mystery," was the reply. "For the moment, we seem to be up a blind alley."

"You're right, Chief. What we need right now is more information," I said importantly.

"Precisely! And that is why we're on our way to the morgue!"

"The morgue!" I yelped, in a sudden wild suspicion. "Are you making arrangements in advance? Because if it's going to be that kind of a case, you can count me out."

Brains looked at me pityingly. "Not that kind of a morgue, nitwit. I am referring to the back files of the *Crestwood Daily Ledger*. I want to investigate the details of the accident in which Mikko's parents were killed."

Well, that was a relief! I checked my watch. "It's four-thirty," I said. "The *Ledger's* offices don't close up until five."

"Excellent," commented Brains. "That should give us sufficient time to explore the files. It won't take more than a few minutes."

That's what *he* thought. When we tried to get in to the *Ledger's* file room we ran right smack into a runty little guy called Pop Dakins. Pop had been in charge of the back files for thirty years. By now he considered them his personal property. Brother! He treated us like a couple of spies trying to break into Fort Knox.

"This reference room is for the *Ledger* staff only! On your way!" he snapped. "I'm a busy man." With that he leaned back in his chair and began working on a crossword puzzle.

"Heck!" I said, in disgust, as we started back down the stairway. "We would have to run into that old fogey."

"Never say die," said Brains, hopefully. "I believe I see someone who can help us."

A slender figure was coming up the stairway toward us. "Hey! It's Lew Jarman!" I said delightedly. Believe me, I was tickled pink to see him.

Lew was the star reporter on the *Crestwood Ledger*. He was an easy-going guy with a relaxed way of walking and talking that made him look half asleep. But Lew Jarman was as sharp as they come. A lot of folks in Crestwood thought the idea of a couple of boys being detectives was pretty funny. But not Lew. In fact he's worked pretty closely with us on some of our cases.

As he spotted us, Lew lost his sleepy air and brightened up.

"Hi, boys!" he smiled. "How's the private-eye business?"

"Not very promising, I'm afraid, Mr. Jarman," answered Brains. "But things would perk up quite a bit if I could get

past Pop Dakins in the morgue. We were hoping to get at the *Ledger* files, but Dakins turned us down cold."

Jarman gave us a shrewd look. "You two wouldn't be working on a case?" he queried.

"Sorry, Mr. Jarman," said Brains, dummifying up. "But I'm afraid we have no statement for the press at this time."

Lew grinned. "Tell you what. How about a deal? I help you get past old Ironpants Dakins and you give me an exclusive story when you crack that case you're working on."

"Agreed—if there is a story," said Brains. "A lot depends on what we find in the files."

We followed Lew Jarman back up to the morgue. When Dakins spotted us he nearly popped a gasket, but Lew told him to simmer down. "These two gentlemen are working with me on a story. I want you to give them all the help they need."

"Now look here, my job is to keep strangers outa them files, and—" Pop protested.

But Lew paid him off with a cigar and we had it made.

We headed into the back of the room and found the item we wanted in jig-time. It was dated March 27th of last year. A big black headline on page one:

CRESTWOOD TEACHER AND WIFE DIE IN AUTOMOBILE CRASH

Mr. Yamada's accident was the lead story. The details weren't pretty. His accident had happened on a Friday evening in a heavy mist. The road was wet. The car skidded off the pavement and plunged down a twenty-foot embankment a mile or so outside of Crestwood.

We were halfway through the story when Brains suddenly lifted his nose and sniffed sharply. "What is that infernal odor?" he asked. "Don't tell me the building's being fumigated?"

I caught a whiff myself. It was Pop smoking Lew's cigar.

Man! Talk about chemical warfare!

"Brains," I said in a strangled voice, "if you've got all the details, let's get out of here."

But Brains had his eyes riveted to the folder of news clippings. "Jimmy! Just listen to this paragraph at the bottom of the page," he said excitedly, and began to read:

"From the tire tracks, county detectives suspect that the Yamada car may have been accidentally forced off the road by a passing vehicle.

The investigation was complicated by the fact that the wrecked car was ransacked after the accident. Although Mr. Yamada's wallet was untouched, police report that unknown persons forced open the glove compartment and slit the upholstery. It is suspected that tramps or sneak-thieves were responsible."

As Brains closed the folder I could see that bird-dog look in his eye. I could tell he was working on some new angle of the case. But right then I couldn't care less.

"For Pete's sake, let's beat it!" I said to Brains, yanking him to the door. I was still breathing as we got to the door but only barely.

"I can see why they call this place the morgue," I said, as we left. "And I know just how they get their customers, too."

Pop Dakins muttered something about "fresh kids" as we went by his desk. I wondered if he could be referring to me.

Out in the hallway I grabbed a few lungfuls of fresh air. Then I turned to Brains. "Imagine somebody going through that wrecked car after the accident!" I said, indignantly. "How low can you get?"

"I'm afraid they weren't just tramps or sneak-thieves, either," commented Brains. "Remember, the article said Mr. Yamada's wallet was not touched."

He paused on the stairway. "Jimmy, it occurs to me that some details of the accident might tie in with the case we're working on."

"In what way?"

"There is a common thread, other than the family connection," he said, thoughtfully. "In both cases someone was engaged in a search for some thing other than just loot."

I thought about the slashed upholstery in that car and about the way the Bevanses' house was ransacked. And Yama had been hunting for something, too, when we caught him in Mikko's room.

Hey! Maybe Brains was onto something! Both cases just might be connected.

"But X, what's everyone looking for?" I asked.

"Frankly, Operative Three, I haven't the faintest idea. What we need is a working theory. Let's try this one . . . Whatever those thieves were looking for in the Yamada car—let's assume they didn't find it. Now, for some reason Mikko's arrival in Crestwood has raised their hopes of locating the mysterious object of their search. And from the evidence we can assume that Yama is searching for the same thing."

"You've got something there, Chief," I said. "What's the next step?"

"I haven't formulated any plans yet, Operative Three." Brains glanced at his watch. "I must return to the laboratory to complete some important experiments in spectroscopic analysis."

I didn't know exactly what that was all about, and I wasn't going to ask.

All the way home a hundred puzzling questions kept bothering me.

Who were the thieves that searched the Yamada car? What were they after? And who ransacked the Bevanses' house? And why? And how did that man-mountain, Yama, fit in? Who? What? Why? How? *Creeps!*

I'd planned to call Brains right after supper but my sister Ann grabbed the phone first. She tied up the line a good half hour just yakking to a girl friend about some handsome English instructor at Crestwood College.

I thought I'd pop my cork before she hung up. But when I finally got X on the phone—what a letdown!

"There's nothing new on the case," X reported, "Except for one small item—the license number on that black car."

"But you didn't get it all—just the first few numbers."

"The numbers were K-429, to be exact," said Brains. "According to the numbering system used on license plates in this state, the letter K indicates that the criminal's car was registered in Kingston County."

"Hey," I cut in. "That's where the state capital is."

"Correct! But there must be fifty thousand cars registered in Kingston County. Without the full license number we haven't a chance of identifying that black car."

"So, we're still up a tree. What do we do now, X?" I asked hopefully. Maybe he had an angle. He always did.

He thought it over. "We sit tight," he answered finally. "We must await further developments."

Hal That was just a fancy way of saying Brains was just as stumped as I was. We were at a dead end!



CHAPTER EIGHT

Unexpected Developments

BUT THAT next day developments came thick and fast.

I called for Brains right after breakfast and we headed for school. We were wheeling up Washington Avenue, past the excavation for the new school wings when Brains caught my eye.

"Jimmy! Look!" he hissed.

Coming down along the walk from the direction of the school was the hulking form of Yama. He shot us a glare right out of the deep-freeze.

"I wonder what that big lug is doing around here?" I asked as we parked our bikes and entered the school.

Brains shook his head. I could see he was trying to puzzle it out too.

We got the answer at the end of first period when we met Mikko on the stairway. He told us that Yama escorted him to school that morning.

"He followed me right into the main hallway," said Mikko, puzzled. "He seems to believe that I am in some kind of danger."

"It is all most suspicious," said Brains. "There may be some other motive for Yama's strange behavior. *Look there!*"

We were on a landing of the south stairway of the school. Brains pointed through a nearby window.

We looked out. Creeps! There below us was Yama. He was parked at the excavation fence watching a giant derrick stacking heavy timbers against the school foundation.

"I thought he went home," said Mikko.

"Evidently he has found something of great interest in that excavation," commented Brains.

The big guy must have had some kind of sixth sense, because just then he looked up at the window. The instant he spotted us he stepped back from the fence and took off.

"I don't understand it," said Mikko.

"But we can't stop to figure it out now," said Brains. "We'd better hurry or we'll be late for the next class."

He was right of course. Our next class was math, and nobody walks in late into Mr. Cummings' class—not unless he wants an extra homework assignment.

Yama's actions had us mystified. Between periods Brains and I kept hustling over to the south stairway to grab a look. But no Yama.

By afternoon I'd forgotten all about the incident, especially since it was Tuesday—the day we get swimming instruction in the basement swimming tank. Mr. Savage, our gym instructor, gave us diving lessons, and brother, we had a great time.



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It was well after three when we left school. I noticed Brains looked annoyed.

"Hey, what's eating you?" I inquired.

"There were some questions I wanted to ask Mikko about his father. But we seem to have missed him. We'll have to find some good reason for dropping in on him this afternoon."

"A reason? What for? Mikko's our friend. Why shouldn't we drop in to see him?" I inquired.

"I'm afraid Yama may not be satisfied with a simple explanation like that," Brains remarked. "As our chief suspect we must avoid arousing his mistrust at all costs."

X was right. We needed a foolproof excuse. Then, out of the blue, it came to me!

"I've got it, Brains! My baseball glove! I forgot it in Mikko's room yesterday."

"Excellent!" chuckled Brains. "Allow me to compliment you on your absent-mindedness. Let's go, Operative Three."

We stopped at my house just long enough to drop off my books. Then we headed for the Bevans home on Madison Street.

We made it across town in nothing flat. We had just turned into Madison Street when we saw a dark green sedan pull up in front of the Bevanses' house. A man got out and headed up the walk to the front door. For a minute I thought it was the family car. Then I caught sight of the small shield fastened in back. It read: PRESS

Brains shot me a look. I knew what was on his mind. The car had a Kingston license tag so it couldn't be from the *Daily Ledger*.

There was something brewing at the Bevanses'!

As we parked and started up the walk, someone was letting the stranger in the front door. For one crazy minute I thought I caught the glimpse of an admiral's uniform. But, of course, I couldn't have been right, so I just forgot about it.

Seconds later Brains punched the doorbell. We waited for a minute, then the door swung wide.

There standing before us—so help me—was an English admiral! In full uniform! Epaulets, cocked hat and all!

Brains and I looked at each other and swallowed hard.

“Sorry,” I gulped. “Wrong address! We’re looking for a boy named Mikko.”

The English admiral smiled. “This is the place, boys. You must be Mikko’s new friends, Brains and Jimmy. He’s told us so much about you. I’m Omar Bevans. Please come in!”

We stepped inside, our eyes riveted to that whacky getup of his.

“Oh, I’d better explain the uniform,” he grinned. He was an apple-cheeked man about my dad’s age and height. And the way his eyes crinkled you got the idea he smiled a lot.

“I was on my way to attend a meeting of my lodge, the National Order of the Sons of the Sea, you know,” he explained.

That’s when the fog lifted. All of a sudden I remembered what my dad had said about Mr. Bevans. He was a *joiner*, a member of all kinds of organizations.

That’s about the time Brains got it too. He gave me a look of sheer relief. For a minute there we figured we’d stumbled into the main entrance of the funny farm.

“I’m afraid Mikko has a visitor,” said Mr. Bevans, as he led us into the living room.

I spotted the man from the green car. He was talking to Mrs. Bevans. I remembered her because she had helped my mother at a community chest cake sale last winter. She was a gray-haired woman, but her face was smooth and young and it sort of lit up on the inside when she talked. I got the idea she’d make a swell mother for a kid like Mikko.

Mikko was helping Yama set out some chairs. He gave us a big grin. Yama gave us an icy glare.

That’s when the stranger spoke up. “And who are these two bright young men?”

He had a mustache and his oily smile showed a mouthful of teeth. Right off, I didn’t like him. He was the kind of grownup who talks down to kids.

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"They're friends of Mikko's," said Mr. Bevans, "Jimmy Carson and Brains Benton . . . Boys, this is Mr. Frank Mace. He's a reporter from the *Capital Observer*. He's here to interview Mikko."

"I came to get my baseball glove. I left it here yesterday," I said foolishly, even though no one had asked me.

Mace began scribbling on a pad. "So Mikko is already making friends! *Splendid*."

He showed his teeth again in what was meant to be a smile. "Our readers are mighty interested in this courageous youngster who crossed the ocean to start his life anew." He rattled it off as if he had it memorized—like one of those fast-talking salesmen who wangles you into buying something you don't need.

"Please, won't you all sit down," said Mrs. Bevans. "I'm sure this interview won't take long."

Everyone sat down except Yama. He just stood there in the corner glowering at Brains and me.

The interview began with Mace asking Mikko a lot of questions about how old he was, and what he expected to be when he grew up, and if he liked America. It was the usual stuff you get in that kind of interview. Mikko answered everything politely, but I got the idea he wasn't enjoying it much.

But before long this guy Mace began asking about Mikko's parents, and what happened on the day of the accident.

That's when Mikko began to choke up. Mrs. Bevans noticed it right away.

She stood up and said, "Mikko, why don't you take your friends up to your room and get Jimmy's glove? I'll talk to Mr. Mace."

That was our cue for an exit.

"Of all the foul luck!" muttered X, as we trailed Mikko upstairs.

I knew just what he meant. If Mrs. Bevans had inside information about the Yamada's accident we wanted to hear it. But it looked like we were out of luck.

Up in Mikko's room we couldn't find the glove anywhere.

"I seem to remember tossing it over that way," I said, pointing to a corner where there was a small chest of drawers.

"It may have fallen behind the chest," Mikko said. He pulled it aside.

Brother! When Brains and I saw what was back there we nearly cheered. The glove was there, all right, but talk about luck! Right in the wall was a hot-air register—one of those old-fashioned square gratings that let the heat circulate between floors. Through it, we could hear every word being said in the living room below.

With a warning look, Brains signaled for silence. We crouched over the grating and tuned in on the conversation. Mikko held back till his curiosity got the better of him and he decided to listen in, too.

It was a strange story Mrs. Bevans told. With every word I felt my pulse drumming faster. This case was big—the biggest one we'd ever handled—*and the most dangerous!*

CHAPTER NINE

Shadow of Evil



NOW I UNDERSTAND how folks feel about eavesdropping. But Brains and I weren't just a couple of nosy kids. We were bona fide investigators looking for information that could help us solve a probable crime.

Anyway, there we were at that hot-air register listening to Mrs. Bevans tell the story of that accident a year ago. Brother,

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she knew plenty that never got into the newspaper.

"It started on a foggy Friday afternoon," Mrs. Bevans explained. "Mikko's dad had taken the day off from his teaching job to attend to personal business in Capital City."

No, Mrs. Bevans didn't know the purpose of his trip. All she could tell was that because of the poor weather Mr. Yamada had left his car at the Bevans house and had made the trip by train.

He returned home late that day. The Bevanses met him at the station with their car. That's when Mr. Yamada asked if the Crestwood bank was still open. It seemed that he had some important business there. But it was after three and the bank was closed for the week end, so they drove him home.

Mrs. Bevans' story must have had some real human interest angle. Mace began side-tracking her with odd questions like—was Mr. Yamada acting nervous and stuff like that.

"As a matter of fact," said Mrs. Bevans, "Mr. Yamada *was* rather tense. I remember he kept glancing back as if someone might be following him."

I turned to see what Brains made of all this. He was soaking it up like a sponge. Mrs. Bevans' every word was being registered as if she were talking into a tape recorder.

So I turned back to get the rest of the story. I didn't want to miss anything.

Well, it seems that Mr. Yamada and his wife got more jittery as the afternoon wore on. They kept sneaking looks out of the window and whispering to each other.

"That wasn't like the Yamadas at all," commented Mrs. Bevans. "But they got even more nervous after that long-distance phone call from a Mr. Barkin or Larkin in Capital City. As a matter of fact, Mr. Yamada was quite angry with this Larkin person," she recalled. "He told him that his offer was unsatisfactory and that he wouldn't deal with him at all."

Right after that Mr. Yamada and his wife went to their room. Yamada must have calmed down because later Mrs. Bevans saw him painting at his drawing board.

Brains and I exchanged swift looks. *Mikko's father must have been painting that weird dragon.*

Brother! If that scroll wasn't a genuine clue I'd eat my hat!

"It was soon afterward that the Yamadas left for the drive that ended so tragically," she continued . . . "No, they didn't say where they were going. Just that they'd be back soon. But they never returned."

There was a long silence, then Mace said what a pity the Yamadas never saw their son again. Hadn't they left him some final message?

That question seemed pretty odd at the time, but I figured Mace was looking for some more human interest angles.

Mrs. Bevans said, "Why no. There wasn't any final message. How could there be, when it all happened so unexpectedly?"

We heard chairs scraping around below us. I figured the interview was over.

Brains and I looked at each other and then at Mikko. There was no telling what he was thinking. His eyes were like big black marbles.

Anyway, we came down just as that oily character Mace was saying he had to rush back to Capital City. Then he left.

That's when Brains and I said good-by. Mrs. Bevans invited us to visit Mikko any time.

Yama was at the door. I looked up to see how he was taking that invitation. His face looked like something carved out of solid rock. Believe me, I was glad to see that door close behind me.

"Creeps!" I blurted as we bicycled away. "You forgot to ask Mikko those questions about his parents."

"Mrs. Bevans' story answered all my questions," X replied. "And her account strengthens my suspicion that there was criminal activity involved in that accident."

I shivered as I remembered Mrs. Bevans' story. "You're right, X. Mikko's dad and mother were in fear of their lives!"

"And yet in spite of their impending peril they left the house," said Brains, thoughtfully.

"Well, maybe they went out for a drive—to calm down."

Brains grimaced. "I doubt it. A man in fear of lurking danger would hardly go out for a pleasure jaunt. Especially in wet, foggy weather. No! the Yamadas were on some vital mission, when the peril they feared caught up with them."

Man! My heart almost stopped at just the thought of it.

"But who were the treacherous culprits?" Brains continued. "And what were they hunting in the wrecked car? Those questions have not yet been answered, Operative Three."

He glanced at his watch. "Four-fifteen," he said. "I've got to hurry back to the lab and record all the new data before the details slip my mind."

"And I'm late for my newspaper route," I said.

As we split up Brains gave me final instructions. "Be alert for any strangers in town, Operative Three. And if you should spot anything suspicious, *contact me at once!*"

I kept my eyes peeled on my route, but not a stranger did I see—except for the time I saw a green car head down Main to Washington Avenue and make a left turn. I recognized the car at once. The PRESS shield on the back was the giveaway! It was Frank Mace, the reporter who had just interviewed Mikko.

Mace was a stranger all right, but I didn't think it was necessary to report him to Brains, especially since we knew who he was and what he was doing in town.

Still, I was puzzled. Back at the Bevanses' Mace had said he was in a hurry to get to Capital City. The state capital lay south of Crestwood. That meant a right turn at Washington Avenue.

But Frank Mace had turned *left!*

It bothered me for a minute, but then I dismissed it from my mind.

And that's where I made a big mistake. Because what we didn't know about this Mace character would fill a book.

And believe me, that book would have made mighty unpleasant reading.



Mysterious Marauder

MID-TERM EXAMS were coming up that next week, so I had a pile of studying to do that night. I figured on calling Brains to see if there were any breaks in the case, but every time I got up to head for the phone my father shot me a warning look. And it was back to the salt mines for Operative Three.

By the time I hit the sack that night I had worked myself into a dither worrying about the case. I didn't think I'd be able to sleep, but all that studying must have knocked me out. Before I knew it it was morning.

I gulped my breakfast and tore off for the Benton house. But all that rush was for nothing, because when I picked up Brains outside his house one look at his face told me the story.

No new developments!

But brother, how the picture changed in the next twenty minutes.

The moment Brains and I walked into school, we knew something was up. A crowd of kids was gathered at the entrance to the auditorium. We couldn't make out what it was all about, except that Horsey Peters was having a hot argument with the school janitor, Mr. Jansen.

Stinky Greene had been there for a while and he told us what it was all about. "It's the creepiest thing I ever heard of," said Stinky, hopping with excitement. "Someone got into the

school last night and moved old Gripsey's statue.

Maybe I'd better fill you in on something. Old Gripsey had been the first school principal in Crestwood. They'd set up this memorial statue of him a year ago. It was a big bronze bust of a knobby-faced man with a big hook nose, fixed to a block of polished granite that was anchored to the floor. And now Stinky was trying to tell us that somebody had moved that statue.

"It's impossible," said Brains. "Why that statue and the pedestal must weigh a good half ton."

Maybe it was impossible, but when we pushed our way to the center of the crowd, sure enough there was old Gripsey shifted out of place by a good three feet.

But what was really drawing the crowd was the argument between old Horsey and Jansen. They were going at it hammer and tongs.

"As the school janitor it's your duty to prevent such vandalism," Horsey was shouting.

"This thing must have happened last night," Jansen yelled right back. "I didn't see it until I came in this morning. I don't get paid to be a night watchman. I don't even get paid enough to be the janitor."

That remark brought down the house and Horsey lowered the boom on us all. "That will be enough of that," he roared. "Report to your classes at once! All of you!"

I started to leave with the others but Brains was crouched beside the statue, running his fingers along the edge of the granite pedestal.

"Barclay Benton! Didn't you hear my orders?" bellowed Horsey.

"I merely wished to complete some personal observations," replied Brains, cheerfully, and followed me upstairs. There he fished out a pad and made some hurried notes.

"Hey," I asked. "What gives?"

"I'm recording some facts. We'll need all the details if we expect to solve the 'Case of the Moving Statue!'"

"The case of the —?" I swallowed hard. "But Brains! Another case when we're up to our necks in an important investigation?"

Brains looked at me scornfully. "Are you telling me Benton and Carson can't handle more than one case at a time? While we await developments on the Yamada case we should be able to solve this comparatively simple mystery."

Hey! He had something there! Why couldn't we handle two cases at a time? Or three? Or four? I could see it all now. Benton and Carson becoming a big-time outfit with branch offices in New York, London and Paris! Wow!

I went into class with my head whirling. I suppose I attended my classes that day, but I don't remember much about them.

Brains and I arranged to come back after school and meet near old Gripley's statue.

When I arrived I found him measuring the pedestal with a steel measuring tape and taking notes.

"Creeps!" I said. "How did they ever get to move that thing? I'll bet it's some nut's idea of a joke."

"Shifting that statue was no joke, Operative Three," Brains replied. "It would take half a dozen men to—"

Right in the middle of that sentence he shifted gears. "Jimmy, take a look at the signature on this bust!"

I looked. The signature read: NOMURI YAMADA

"Creeps!" I exclaimed. "Then Mikko's dad made that statue?"

"It's not surprising. Mr. Yamada was a gifted artist. But right now our problem is not who sculpted this bronze, but who moved it. And why?"

It was just then that we spotted Mr. Peters coming down the hall. So, we took off—fast!

"I have an assignment for you," said Brains, when we paused to catch our breath on the second floor. "The minute school is over you are to make a fast check of the school entrances and basement windows. See if any of them have been jimmied open."

"I'll meet you out at the bike racks when you're finished," he

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added. "I know I can rely on you for a thorough job, Operative Three."

"You can count on me, Chief," I said.

I thought I knew that school inside out, but I'll bet I spotted a dozen windows and entrances I'd never seen before. Ventilators, windows, coal chutes—I even checked the hole in the boiler-room wall that the builders made for the pipes from the new wing. I didn't get to examine it thoroughly because the construction foreman, a noisy little guy with GUNTY lettered on his helmet, began yelling at me to get out of the pit.

But nobody could get in *that* way. The construction men had piled a stack of heavy timbers across it to seal it off.

My inspection completed, I reported to Brains out at the bike racks. I found him writing in his notebook.

"Assignment completed as per orders, Chief. I found no signs of forcible entry," I informed him.

"Well done, Operative Three." He nodded his approval.

I felt my chest expand a good six inches.

Brains scribbled a few more notes, then closed the pad. "While you were inside, Mikko informed me of some startling developments."

Startling developments? Golly! "What happened?" I pleaded.

"At ten o'clock last night our client heard prowlers in his yard. Glancing from the window he saw Yama in the shadows. Later Yama reported hearing prowlers too, but claims he frightened them away."

Brains snapped his notebook shut. "Operative Three, I'm afraid I'll have to devote more time to the Yamada case. I propose that you handle the affair of the moving statue on your own. You'll be in complete charge."

I lit up like a neon light! Me, Operative Three, in complete charge of a case! How lucky can you get?

"Roger, Chief!" I said. "I'm ready to take over."

"I knew I could rely on you. Report any new developments to me at once. And if you need any help you can call on me at any time."

"Right," I replied. But to myself I made a vow that I'd solve the case of the moving statue on my own, or die trying.

We took off for home. We were splitting up at the corner of Chestnut and Franklin when Brains stopped me.

"A bit of advice, Operative Three! I suggest you keep the school under close surveillance tonight. The culprits may return!"

Wouldn't you know it? Five minutes after he puts me in charge of a case he's back telling me what to do!

"Thanks for the suggestion, X," I said, coldly. "But I'll handle this case in my own way."

"Certainly, Jimmy. I understand perfectly," smiled Brains.

I was pretty sure of myself as I headed home. But I thought it over as I worked my paper route. Brains' suggestion made sense after all. The criminal always returns to the scene of his crime. If those vandals came back to the school tonight they'd walk right into a trap set by none other than good old Operative Three.

That's what I *thought*. When I tried to slip out after supper my dad stopped me cold. In a few well chosen words he reminded me about next week's mid-terms.

I tried to argue. But Dad laid down the law. My doom was sealed! For that night at least, Operative Three investigated nothing but Math, Science and English.

"Oh, well!" I consoled myself, "those criminals probably won't come back to the school tonight anyhow."

But, brother! Was I wrong!

That very night the criminals struck again!



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Dead of Night

I DIDN'T KNOW about it until the next day when I came to school and found the hallway swarming with kids. The place was a bedlam, but somehow I managed to find out what happened.

The vandals had broken into the school, drained the swimming tank and ripped dozens of tiles from the wall of the empty pool!

I pushed my way downstairs through the crowds to the scene of the crime. That's when I spotted Brains in the crowd.

"I've been waiting for you, Jimmy!" he snapped. "Did you see the culprits? Can you identify them?"

"Culprits! What culprits?" I sputtered.

"You are jesting, Operative Three. Surely you had the school under observation last night." He looked at me horrified.

Creeps! I was in the soup—up to my eyeballs!

"Brains," I groaned. "My dad made me stay home and study."

"Well, it can't be helped now," said Brains icily.

He pushed his way grimly toward the pool. I followed him, wondering how I'd ever square things for this fumble.

When we reached the edge of the tank there was Mr. Peters standing among the broken tiles, giving Mr. Jansen another dressing down.

Brother, it was a riproaring performance!

Horsey was so busy telling Jansen off that he never noticed when Brains jumped to the floor of the tank and began to examine the tiles. Me? I was right behind Brains. After all, it was *my* case!

"Yesterday somebody moved the statue," Peters was shouting. "Today, I find the pool drained and these tiles broken off. Jansen, I demand to know who's perpetrating this vandalism!"

I didn't listen to any more. I was watching Brains scrounge among those broken tiles. I joined him. I could find a clue as easy as he could, couldn't I?

And brother, I *did*! Right there under the tiles I found a knife blade!

"Brains! Take a look at this," I yelped. "If I'm not mistaken it came from the knife that broke off these tiles."

I guess I spoke too loud, because in the next second a tidal wave of kids spilled into the pool to gander at the clue.

In the crush somebody snatched the blade from my hand! It was Tuffy Wagner!

"Hey, there's some kind of lettering on this blade," said Tuffy, smirking. "It says—*made in Japan*! And we all know someone who just came from Japan."

See what I mean about Tuffy? That kid was mean, clear through. He was still sore at Mikko and this was his way of getting back at him.

Horsey was giving Mikko a fishy eye when Brains spoke up.

"Mr. Peters, if Mikko brought that knife from Japan it would have Japanese engraving on it. English letters are only engraved on goods manufactured for export."

That made sense. But some kids looked disappointed. Peters must have been convinced because he ordered everyone upstairs and into class. Brains, Mikko and I walked up together. Up in the main corridor Mikko turned to us, his lips tight.

"My father used to say that here in the United States a man is innocent unless he is proven guilty . . . But now, everyone will think I broke those tiles, even though there's no proof."

"Justice will be done," said Brains, in his best Sherlock

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Holmes voice. "Now, just go to class and forget it. Benton and Carson will find the criminal, never fear."

He said that as if finding the culprit would be a cinch. But I knew better. The only clue we had was that knife blade.

All during my English class I kept wondering what the plan of action would be. Brains gave me the details at the end of the first period.

"Operative Three, I hesitate to make any suggestions. After all, this is *your* case," he reminded me.

"Go right ahead, X, speak up," I said generously. "I'm always open for new ideas." I'd bungled the case so far. There was no sense in being stubborn about it.

"Very well," continued X. "I suggest we make a reconnaissance of the school tonight and try to trap the guilty party."

"Brains, have you got rocks in your head? Horsey is sure to tell the police about this. They'll be on guard."

"I doubt that," said Brains. "Mr. Peters and Police Chief Hadley are feuding again. Peters would rather resign than call in the police."

Say, Brains was right! Horsey and Chief Hadley had both asked the town council for a budget increase in January. Since there wasn't enough money to go around they both argued about who ought to get it.

Before the squabble was over Horsey was saying that Hadley wasn't even fit to issue a traffic ticket. Hadley said Horsey couldn't run a school of fish.

So you see, before Peters would call in Hadley he'd see someone steal the school first.

So Brains was on the beam, after all! A reconnaissance was vital. I argued a little just to let him know I was still in charge of the case, but I let him have his way.

I thought I'd have trouble getting out of the house again that night. But I promised Dad I'd do some extra studying over the week end—so I got a reprieve.

At nine that night there we were, Brains and I, crawling through the shrubbery toward the school.

I'd known that school all my life, but now, in the dark, it was like being in another world. Brains parked me under some bushes in front of the building. *Man!* It was spooky!

"You camp here and keep alert for prowlers," X hissed. "I'm going to circle the building and check the doors."

With that, he vanished into the blackness.

I crouched there. My nerves jangled at the sound of every passing car. Jeepers! How did I get mixed up in this crazy business?

I was beginning to wonder what happened to Brains when suddenly I heard a loud click somewhere out in the night.

My heart almost stopped as I peered blindly into the dark. There was some light from a street lamp on Washington Avenue, but with all the shrubbery around, it didn't mean a thing.

Then, a second later I thought I heard the shuffle of feet on stone and the sound of a closing door. But I told myself I couldn't be sure.

But when I saw a faint, glowing light moving up along the south stair well, I knew it wasn't my imagination! *Someone was inside the school!* And it could only be the criminals who'd moved the statue and drained the pool!

Creeps! Maybe they were all around me in the dark!

I was in a ring-tailed panic. I had to find Brains! I started to soft-shoe along the school wall. It was like groping in an unlit coal mine at midnight. I had horrible visions of something following me in the dark, something big and strong and built like a mountain! I started to run! Then, suddenly, whammol! I slammed into something in the dark. I nearly died right there! I started to let go with a yell but not a sound came out of me!

Someone had clapped a clammy hand over my mouth!

"Quiet, you imbecile!" said a voice in my ear. I almost passed out with relief. It was Brains!

"What's wrong, Operative Three? Spill it!" he hissed.

I told him about the light in the stairwell. He was moving even before I finished. "Follow me!" he whispered.

Follow him? *Creeps!* He didn't think I'd stay out there by

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myself! I latched on to his jacket and let him lead. He must have had the eyes of a cat because in a minute we were right at the door leading to the south stairway.

Brains reached out and tried the door latch. The door swung wide with a click. We stared inside. All we could see was the red light at the foot of the stairs. The rest was blackness!

"Brains! We can't stay here," I said tensely.

"Quite right," he replied. "We're going upstairs to track down the intruder!"

I didn't go for that "we" stuff, I can tell you. Good grief! Just the thought of trailing that prowler in the dark gave me the shakes. That guy might be armed. I told myself it was sheer insanity to risk our lives like that.

But when Brains cat-footed up the stairway, who do you think was right behind him? You guessed it! It was that good old faithful fathead, Operative Threel

As we hit each floor Brains would stop and listen—and then start climbing again. He must have heard something on the fourth-floor landing because he signaled for silence. Then he slipped through the door, beckoning me to follow.

Out in the corridor I saw a faint light coming from the staff room down the hall. There was the furtive sound of desk drawers being opened and shut.

We slipped closer! Creeps! That guy inside was bound to hear my knees knocking.

Then another thought hit me. That prowler might have a gang with him! For all I knew they might have been behind us right then!

I turned for a quick look. And that was where I goofed. Because Brains picked just that moment to stop short. I bumped into him jolting him sideways against the wall. In the dead silence it made an echoing *boom*.

Up ahead, the faint light went out! We heard the sound of running feet! The intruder was on the move! A door slammed and we knew he was heading down the stairway.

"Come on," snapped Brains. "We mustn't let him get away."

"Why not?" I asked. "It's perfectly all right with me."

But Brains was too busy running to listen. As we reached the stairway we stopped. We couldn't hear a sound.

"Brains, I think he's left the building," I said hopefully.

Brains started down. "He may be on a lower floor! We'll check!" I followed, with my heart almost kicking a hole in my chest.

We turned off at the second-floor landing. In the corridor I grabbed Brains' arm. "X, this is crazy! We can't wander around here all night in the dark."

How right I was! We were through wandering. Because suddenly we heard a footfall behind us. We whirled. A spear of light pinned us against the wall!

That glare blinded us. I couldn't make out who stood behind it except that he was as big as a house and he had hands the size of hams.

One of those hands held the flashlight.

The other held a club!



CHAPTER TWELVE

Danger in the Dark

IT WAS a living nightmare. I tried to run, but somebody had nailed my shoes to the floor. Brains' eyes were bugging as if he was in a trance.

It was the guy with the flashlight that spoke first. "Okay, you two," he rasped. "What are you doing here? Speak up!"

"We'd be happy to answer if you'd just take that light out of

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our eyes," said Brains, fighting for time.

The unknown stranger tripped a switch that killed the glare but left the lamp glowing with a softer light. I could see him more clearly now.

He was big. He wore a broken-down hat and a pair of overalls. His eyes were glass-hard and his jaw looked like a lumpy rock. He had a policeman's billy and looked as if he might start swinging it any minute.

"All right, spill it," he growled.

It was Brains that spoke up. "This is Jimmy Carson and my name's Benton. We're pupils in this school. We were in the vicinity when we saw a light in one of the upper floors. There had been some vandalism in the school, so we decided to investigate . . . And now, may we know who *you* are and by what authority you are questioning us?"

Talk about *nervel*! That red-headed buddy of mine sounded as bossy as old Peters himself.

For a second I thought the big guy would bash us, but all he did was jerk his thumb at a silver badge pinned to his overalls.

"I'm the night watchman at the construction job, sonny," he growled. "Sabin's my name. There's been some monkey business here. Mr. Peters is paying me extra to watch this place at night."

Sabin rubbed his chin. "You kids have no business here," he grated, "but to tell the truth I thought I saw a light up here myself a while ago." He flashed a light back down the corridor and then turned to us with a worried look.

"That prowler's probably beat it by now, but I'll check through the school anyhow. You two kids better scam. And don't let me catch you around here again. Get me?"

We got him, all right! We streaked out of there like a couple of greyhounds. And we didn't slow down until we got back to headquarters.

Up in the lab, Brains opened a filing cabinet and took out a folder labeled: CASE OF THE MOVING STATUE.

Brains had kept a file of all our cases ever since we'd started

the Benton and Carson Agency. It was a fat file.

"Someday," he often said, "criminologists of the future will be studying the techniques and methods of Benton and Carson."

Now as he recorded the evening's events he turned to me. "Operative Three, do you recall what time it was that you first spotted the light in the school?"

"About nine-thirty, I think. But what's so important about that?"

He flicked his eyes in my direction. "We must make a record of the M.O."

"The M.O.? What's that?" I asked.

"The *modus operandi*—that's Latin for 'method of operation,'" he explained. "A criminal's methods often fall into a pattern. Making a record of his M.O. may help trap the culprit."

"I doubt if we'll get to nab the guy," I said. "With Sabin on guard that prowler has probably been scared off."

"I think not. There are a dozen ways of slipping into the school unnoticed, as we have seen tonight. It's too much for *one* man to guard. I'd say this Sabin needs assistance!"

Boy, I could just read X's mind. If he was planning to talk me into another night patrol, he had another think coming!

But if anyone had another think coming it was me.

The very next morning Mikko reported persons unknown had once again prowled the Bevanses' grounds the night before!

"Operative Three, our client is obviously in great peril," Brains said. "I'm afraid we'll both have to drop everything else and get back to the Yamada case."

"But what about the mystery of the moving statue?" I said indignantly. "Creeps! I finally get to handle a case on my own and you yank me off the assignment!"

Brains thought it over. "Jimmy, I'm ready to make one more try at trapping the school vandals," he said generously. "Another reconnaissance tonight might do the trick."

Of course it was still my case, and Brains was only making a

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suggestion. But my back was to the wall. I had to agree.

Luck was with me that night. Dad and Mom got interested in an old movie on TV and didn't make any fuss at all about my going out to see Brains.

Still, it was after nine when I got to the lab and Brains was on pins and needles. "Operative Three, you're late! While you were dawdling at home the prowler might have slipped into the school."

"Keep your shirt on. He'd never get past Sabin," I said.

Brains made a wry face. I could see he didn't have much confidence in that watchman.

We figured our bikes would only get in the way, so we hoofed it over to the school. There Brains parked me in the bushes again and then vanished into the night. He was back in moments.

"All the doors and entrances are secured," he whispered.

"Fine and dandy! Maybe we ought to go home," I suggested hopefully.

"Don't be an idiot! That vandal isn't due for another ten minutes, if he keeps to his M.O."

"I know. His *modus operandi*"

"There's hope for you yet, Operative Three," chuckled Brains.

And then suddenly he gasped as if someone had grabbed his throat. "Jimmy! Up there!" He pointed toward the school.

I spotted it at once—a faint light moving up along a stairway! "Come on," snapped Brains. "We've got to find the door he used. It's probably still open!"

But that's where he was wrong. We ran from one entrance to another. They were all locked tight!

"Brains, we've got to find Sabin and tell him," I choked.

"Very well," he said, reluctantly. "We don't have much choice."

We cut past the school figuring we'd find Sabin at the construction shack a block down Washington Avenue. We'd just passed the beginning of the excavation, when suddenly there

was a heavy thumping sound!—I felt the earth shake under me.

“Creeps! What was *that*?” I whispered, hoarsely.

“It came from inside the excavation,” Brains hissed. There was no fence at this spot, only a guard rail. Brains peered over it into the dark.

The weak light from a lantern on the rail showed part of the foundation for the new wing. You could see some of the timbering and the concrete forms. The rest was a huge pool of darkness.

Suddenly Brains gasped. “Jimmy! *Over there!*”

I looked hard. On the far side of the excavation one of the safety lanterns winked and then was blotted out for a long moment. *Someone was climbing out of the excavation!*

We were so wrapped up in what we’d seen that we never heard the footsteps behind us until it was too late.

“So it’s you two again!” a voice rasped behind us.

We whirled! It was Sabin! His face was set in an angry scowl.

“We were passing the school and we saw another light,” wheezed Brains. “We were coming to tell you.”

“Another light?” Sabin shot a look at the school. “Where?”

“Up on the fourth floor,” Brains replied excitedly.

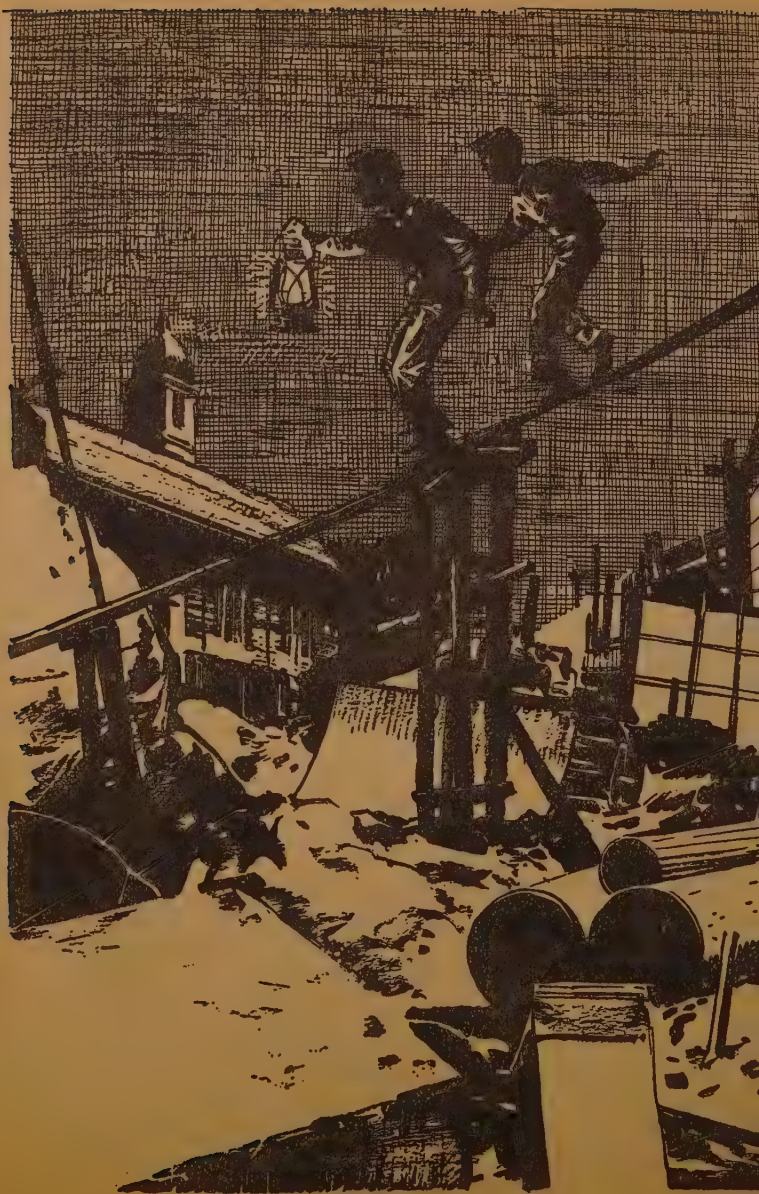
Sabin unhooked his billy. “Okay, kids,” he snapped. “You stay here. I’ll go and check!” He trotted toward the school.

I wondered why Brains didn’t tell Sabin about that mysterious noise or that shadowy figure we saw climbing out of the excavation, but I could see he had some plan in mind.

The minute Sabin disappeared inside the school, X grabbed my arm. “Operative Three! There isn’t a moment to lose. We’ve got to investigate that noise we heard.” He yanked me toward a narrow plank runway that plunged downward into the darkness of the excavation.

“But Brains,” I protested wildly. “We can’t see anything. It’s as black as pitch down there.”

X snatched the lantern from the guard rail. “On the double, Operative Three! Every minute counts!” He started down the runway.



I must have been crazy to do it, but I followed him. That ramp bounced around like mad. I kept wondering how far we'd fall if we slipped off.

Somehow we made it to the bottom of the excavation alive, but don't ask me how.

"Okay, what do we do now?" I shuddered. The lantern revealed a jungle of cinder blocks, lumber and assorted building equipment.

"Follow me!" X said. "I believe the sound came from this direction."

Brains led me through that tangled mess as if he had X-ray vision. But suddenly we were smack up against a blank stone wall. It was the school foundation. I could see the heavy timbers that blocked the hole which led to the school boiler-room. "That sound came from about here," said Brains, as he eyed the timbers speculatively. He lowered the lamp and surveyed the pile of beams. Suddenly he crouched down.

"Jimmy! Come here!" he commanded.

There in the mud was a line of footprints.

"Kindly observe the sharp edges of each heelprint, Operative Three. These tracks were made minutes ago!"

That made sense.

"And they lead right under the pile of timber," X added. "Does that tell you anything, Operative Three?"

I knew what he was driving at, but I didn't want to believe it.

But Brains spelled it out. "Someone shifted those beams and got through that hole in the wall! Operative Three, we can only conclude that the criminal we're after has the strength of a *full-grown gorilla*!"

My teeth chattered like castanets. I wasn't after anybody. Especially a full-grown gorilla. All I wanted was to find a hole, crawl in, and pull it in after me.

"Creeps! What if that gorilla comes back? Let's get out of here," I pleaded.

"In a few moments," replied Brains. "I need a cast of one of those footprints as evidence . . . I noticed a bag of cement

lying in a wheelbarrow, back there. It will be an excellent substitute for plaster of Paris."

It was, too. In nothing flat Brains found a partly filled water bucket, mixed a batch of cement, and poured it into one of the footprints. Then he dropped a scrap of lumber over the patch of wet cement.

"Now quickly," he snapped. "We've got to get back up to the sidewalk before Sabin returns."

Sabin! Holy cats! He'd murder us if he caught us down here!

But old X-ray-eyes Benton took the lead and within a minute we were up on the ramp leading to the street.

We barely made it. Seconds after we hit the sidewalk Sabin came out of the school.

"I didn't see anyone in there," he growled. "But, there were a couple of doors opened that should have been closed." He shot us a hard look. "It's darned funny you kids happen to be around whenever there's trouble brewing."

"Of course," said Brains, crisply, "if you don't want to be bothered—we could always report anything suspicious to Mr. Peters."

"I didn't mean it that way," was the hasty reply. "If you spot anyone in the school after hours, you be sure to tell me."

"Gladly," said X. "You may be certain of our complete and unhesitating cooperation."

We left him there with his jaw sagging. He'd never met anyone like Brains before. It can be quite a shock.

I picked up my bike at the Benton house. As I hopped aboard I couldn't resist needling Brains.

"Reconnaissance, hal We *still* don't know who's prowling around that school, or why."

"We made excellent progress tonight," replied Brains. "We know how the culprit got into the school. The cast of his footprint will undoubtedly help us to identify him and run him to earth."

"And just how will you get the cast with Sabin watching the excavation?" I challenged him.

He thought about that for a minute. "Report after lunch tomorrow," he said. "I'll have a plan formulated."

I rode home grinning to myself. X sounded pretty sure of himself, but he'd have to show me. But brother, did he ever!

The next day was Saturday. That's the day I make the collections on my newspaper route. I didn't get home till noon. I grabbed a quick lunch and took off for the lab. When I arrived Brains met me with a folded newspaper in his hand.

"Don't bother taking off your jacket," he said. "We're on our way to recover the cast of that footprint."

"In broad daylight?" I blurted. "X, your clutch is slipping!"

He glared at me. "There is no danger of apprehension. I have formulated a foolproof plan." With that he led me out of the lab and into the alley.

"Foolproof plan? How many times do you think we can out-fox Sabin and get away with it?"

"Sabin is the *night* watchman," he informed me. "Since this is Saturday afternoon, there is someone else on duty. Mr. Gunty, I believe. I checked the terrain this morning."

"Gunty? The construction foreman?" I said wonderingly.

Brains nodded. "Obviously they've had trouble hiring a day watchman. Gunty probably took over temporarily."

"Creeps! That Gunty is pretty sharp," I pointed out. "How are you going to get past him?"

"I shall explain my plan when we reach the scene of operations," he informed me.

Brains said our bikes would only be in the way so we walked it again. When we hit Washington and Vine we had a clear view of the entire excavation and the construction shack. Gunty was sitting outside the shack, reading a paper. But from where he sat he could spot any monkey business easy as pie.

"All right, mastermind," I said to Brains. "Fill me in! Just how do we get Gunty off his guard?"

Brains outlined his plan briefly. Right around the corner on Washington Avenue was the Sunny Spa, the favorite hangout for kids after school. I was to use the public phone inside, put

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through a call to the shack and tie Gunty up in a conversation.

"Just keep him on the phone for five minutes," commanded Brains. "That's all I need."

"It's crazy!" I wailed. "What do I talk about? The price of cabbages in Siberia, or the weather conditions in Timbuctoo?"

"Tell him you're making a survey on what cigars construction men prefer. I leave the details to you," he said grandly. "After all, this is *your* case, you know."

The more I thought of it the battier it sounded. The gag would never work. I grabbed at one last straw.

"Wait! How do you know there's a telephone in the shack?"

"I checked with information." And grinning triumphantly he handed me a slip of paper. "Here's the phone number."

I was hooked!

Brains looked at his watch. "It's now exactly one twenty-three. Give me ten minutes to get to the other side of the excavation and then place the call."

As he headed up Washington Avenue I stood there wondering why I let him talk me into these whacky situations . . . Still, this idea was just crazy enough to work. I looked at my watch. Brains said to give him ten minutes. I'd need about the same amount of time to work up enough courage to make the call.

I went inside the store and killed a few minutes at the magazine rack. Then I stepped into the phone booth.

And what do you know? It was one of those new all-glass jobs. I could see right through the side of it. And through the store window, too. I had a perfect view of Gunty and most of the excavation.

I checked my watch. Time! I steeled my nerves and dialed the number. I heard the ringing at the far end of the line. Then I saw Gunty put down his paper and head into the shack.

Man! This crazy deal would work after all!

At the other end of the wire someone lifted the phone. "Hello! County Construction Company! Who's calling?"

"Hello." I began. And then suddenly my mind went blank! I had forgotten completely what I was supposed to say!



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Concrete Clue

"WHO IS IT? Speak up, please!" Gunty sounded peeved enough to hang up. I spotted Brains climbing down the far side of the foundation. *I had to keep Gunty on the line.*

"This is M-Mah, M-Morgan." I stuttered the first thing that popped into my mind. "I want to speak to the man in charge." I was so excited, my voice was a high-pitched squeak.

"This is Timothy Gunty. I'm in charge. What can I do for you, Madam?"

Madam! My voice had come out so squeaky he thought I was a woman! It would take too long to explain. I let it ride.

"Mr. Gunty," I said, keeping my voice up high, "I passed by the excavation last night. I was taking a walk, you know."

I stretched it out, sounding all atwitter. I told him I'd dropped a bracelet in the excavation. I wasn't sure just where.

With that for a starter I kept him on the phone, minute after minute, telling him all about how beautiful the imaginary bracelet was and how much it cost and how heartbroken I'd be if I lost it.

I was running out of words when I saw Brains climb out of the excavation . . . It was time to say good-by to Gunty.

"Oh, Mr. Gunty," I said. "I've made the *silliest* mistake. Here's my bracelet after all. It was on the dresser all the time."

I could almost hear him explode as he slammed down the receiver.

Minutes later Brains came down Washington Avenue with a flat package tucked under his arm. "Well done, Operative Three," he said. "I knew I could depend on you."

"Any time, Chief," I grinned. Then we took off.

Up at the lab Brains unwrapped the concrete slab and carefully brushed the loose earth away. "Holy smoke! The shoe that made that print must have been big as a suitcase."

Just then something else caught the chief's eye. "Kindly observe the impression of that heel, Operative Three," he said, excitedly.

Creeps! That heel bore the imprint of Japanese lettering!

"A king-sized shoe and a heel with a Japanese trademark! Does that ring a bell?" Brains asked softly.

"Yamal" I gasped. "Only Yama could have lifted those beams!"

"You're probably right," agreed X. "But we must have some confirmation. A visit to our client seems in order."

He rewrapped the casting and we headed for the Bevanses' house.

We were worried about running into the Bevanses, or Yama. That package would be awkward to explain. But it was Mikko who answered the door. We breathed an extra sigh of relief when he told us that Yama was at the post office mailing a letter to Japan. The Bevanses were visiting friends in Middlebury and wouldn't be back until about midnight.

With the coast clear, we gave Mikko a run-down on our discovery. When we unwrapped the casting of the footprint I thought his eyes would pop. He shook his head in disbelief.

"I can't believe it would be Yama," he kept saying.

"There is only one way to verify it," Brains told him. "We must check this impression against Yama's shoe."

Reluctantly, Mikko led us up to Yama's room. You could see he hated to do it, but he knew it had to be done.

We found a pair of shoes in Yama's closet all right. But they were spic and span.

"He could have cleaned them last night," muttered Brains.

I picked up one of the shoes. Maybe it was clean but it was big—like a canal barge. It had that Japanese trademark on it. *And it matched the cast perfectly.*

"I guess that wraps it up," I said, putting down the shoe. "That footprint proves Yama broke into the school last night. *He's our man!*"

I looked up, but Mikko wasn't listening to me. Neither was Brains. Both of them were staring past me. I whipped around.

There, in the doorway, stood Yama!

It was like waiting for a time bomb to go off! I was too scared to feel anything. Brains had a pained look—as if he'd just caught his finger in a closing door.

It was Yama who spoke at last. "Forgive my ignorance," he rumbled. "But what is explanation of your presence in my room?"

His voice shook the floor under us. The only one not too scared to answer was Mikko. That kid was a head shorter than me but he spoke right up.

"We apologize for the intrusion, Yama-san." Mikko's voice was cold and distant, the way you'd talk to someone who'd double-crossed you. "However, I have just seen evidence that you have been breaking into the school at night. Is this true?"

Yama stared at the casting—figuring it out. Suddenly the frozen mask of his face seemed to melt and come apart. Yama turned away as if he couldn't face us.

"I will try to explain," he said finally. He turned toward Brains and me with a little bow. "Ten thousand apologies, but I must speak to Mikko alone."

But Mikko had his back up. "Brains and Jimmy are my good friends. They will stay here and hear what you have to say."

Yama sucked in his breath sharply and bowed again. "Forgive my rudeness. It shall be as you wish."

"You may speak without fear," said Brains, suddenly finding his voice. "And let me assure you that all information will be treated with the strictest confidence. Pray, proceed!"

Then and there Yama began his fantastic story.



The Message

RIGHT AT the start Brains began taking notes, but it wasn't easy. Yama was all wound up and having trouble with his English. He kept shifting to Japanese and Mikko would translate. Brains had to scribble like crazy to get it all down.

Anyway, according to Yama, this whole strange affair began before World War II. Mikko's relatives, the Japanese branch of the Yamada family, were jewel dealers who did a big export business with American firms.

"Then came war and big trouble for Obii-san," said Yama. "Obii-san? Who's that?" I butted in.

Mikko translated for me. "The word means 'honorable grandfather,' Yama refers to Kiro Yamada, my father's uncle, the head of the Yamada family in Japan. He is an old man and very wise."

Obii-san's wisdom didn't help much when the war started. The Yamadas were in a jam because of their trade with Americans. And when the Japanese authorities found out Obii-san had an American-born nephew, they clamped down and confiscated all the Yamadas' money.

"Only one thing was saved from secret police," said Yama, "a most valuable necklace which was in the hands of a dealer in America."

The necklace was a triple strand of the finest Red Sea pearls and worth a fortune. Yama gave us the amount in Japanese

yen. Brains did some mental arithmetic, and then let out a long whistle.

"That would come to about two hundred thousand dollars," he said.

"*Hail!* Yes!" said Yama, "But as property of enemy alien the pearls were seized by American government."

"That would be the office of the Alien Properties Custodian," Brains said.

"That was name I was told," nodded Yama. And he returned to his story.

The Yamada family had real bad times during the war. But when hostilities ended, Obii-san's nephew, Nomuri Yamada, arrived from America on an Army Intelligence mission. Nomuri's earnings weren't high, but he tried to help his Japanese relatives.

"Obii-san was most grateful for assistance," Yama said. "But he wished to . . . to . . . what is American word? . . . to stand on own feet and start jewel business again. For this, much money needed."

Obii-san tried to recover the pearl necklace, but was told it might be years before the American government released enemy property to its former owners.

Meanwhile Nomuri had met the Japanese girl who was to become his wife. It was Obii-san who had made the match. To the old man his nephew was like a son. And that went double for Mikko, when he was born.

The years passed. Mikko's dad ended his service in the army and decided to return to the United States with his wife. But Mikko would be left with Obii-san and the family. Nomuri wanted to get settled in a job and set up a home before he sent for Mikko. He had graduated from State U. and had a certificate to teach in this state, so, when he heard of a position in Crestwood, he applied for it and got it.

"On departure for America Honorable Nomuri promised to recover the necklace. Obii-san signed papers to permit nephew to sell the jewels and send the money to Japan."

A few months after Mikko's parents arrived in America, Obii-san learned the pearls were about to be released to his nephew.

"But that evening came bad omen!" Yama said in a ghostly voice. "Crow flew to roof of Obii-san's house and called four times. The next day came news that Mikko's parents died in accident."

Creeps! Maybe it was all superstition, but that story about the crow cawing a warning of death sent icy shivers along my backbone. I could almost see ghosts floating around that room.

"Obii-san's heart was broken," Yama continued. "He loved nephew like son. Obii-san was sick for many days. Cannot eat. Cannot speak!"

It took weeks for the old man to recover. It was only then that someone remembered the necklace in America. There was lots of red tape, with cables and letters going back and forth. But the American authorities said the pearls had been released to Mikko's father. They were not among his things.

That finished the last chance for the house of Yamada. Obii-san took the blow fatalistically. His main concern was for the child, Mikko. The family scrounged around for the money to keep Mikko in the American school in Japan where his father had entered him.

Then, one day, came a letter from the Bevanses, Nomuri Yamada's best friends in America. They wanted to bring Mikko to America and adopt him.

"But Japanese family very proud. Did not like to see Mikko raised by strangers," said Yama.

But at a family conference Obii-san pointed out that Mikko was an American citizen by law, and that Mikko's father wanted his son brought up as an American. Remembering the gratitude they owed Nomuri Yamada, the family agreed to send Mikko to America.

But Yama was sent along as a kind of traveling companion until the boy got settled. It was only as Yama and Mikko were about to leave that Obii-san got his big idea of having Yama keep an eye open for the pearls when he got to America.

But as soon as he arrived in Crestwood, Yama realized he and Mikko were being shadowed and that something shady was going on.

"When this house was searched I knew someone else was hunting for pearl necklace." Yama growled. "I had to find pearls quickly . . . but do not know where to begin my search until I learned of the message on the dragon scroll."

"I believe Yama is referring to the picture your father painted," said Brains. "Would you get it for us?"

It took a minute for Mikko to go to his room and pick up the drawing. "Please to examine the script beneath the dragon," said Yama. "The first line reads:

'It is in the house of learning that one finds the secret of all things . . .'

He paused, then added, "It was Brains-san who said that this sounded like message from Mikko's father."

Brains shot me a triumphant look. Yama had just admitted he'd been eavesdropping outside Mikko's door the day we'd found the dragon scroll. But Brains let it go.

"Then you think that the words on the dragon scroll refer to the location of the pearls?" Brains asked sharply.

Yama nodded. "It is my belief that Nomuri-san feared the pearls would be stolen and hid them for safe-keeping. The message is clear—'It is in the house of learning one finds the secret of all things.'"

"And that is why you broke into the school?" Brains asked.

"I broke nothing, Brains-san," Yama protested. "There was opening in school wall. I had only to lift some wood."

Holy smokes! The way he talked about those beams you'd think they were match sticks. We didn't have to ask how he knew about that hole in the school foundation. We'd seen him watching the derrick cover up that hole a few days before.

Yama took up his story again. Once inside the school, he didn't know where to begin looking for the pearls. Then he remembered a statue in the main hall with Mr. Yamada's signature cut into the bronze.

So, *just like that*, he shifted that bust, on the off-chance the pearls might be cached beneath it.

But right then he realized the whole idea was silly. He was about to shift the statue back when he heard a noise and left in a hurry.

Brains looked up from his notes. "I take it that you were still looking for the pearls when you broke away those tiles in the swimming pool," he dead-panned.

Yama looked up, puzzled. He started to talk but couldn't find the words, and began spouting in Japanese.

Mikko answered him. For a minute or so they tossed it up and back between them. Then Mikko translated.

"This is most strange. Yama says he never went near the pool. He can't understand why you should accuse him."

Brains was suddenly alert. "That can only mean that some other party has been breaking into the school."

"That mysterious gang!" I said excitedly. "Say! I'll bet they were after the pearls from the start."

"That is most probable," Brains nodded. "Somehow they have learned of the existence of that necklace. They have been tailing Mikko and Yama hoping one or the other would lead them to it."

"But why should they search the school?" asked Mikko. "They couldn't have read the message on the dragon scroll."

That's when Yama spoke up. "They must have seen me when I entered school."

"But why'd they rip off the tiles in the pool?" I asked.

"This is just a guess," explained Brains. "But the gang may have discovered that Mikko's father was also the swimming instructor and spent a great deal of time at the pool. They may have assumed he cached the necklace behind those tiles."

I couldn't figure how the gang guessed which tiles to rip off, but Brains checked his notebook and showed us that the broken tiles had been fastened with a different cement from that used on the rest of the tiles.

"It was probably a repair patch," he said. "The difference

in the color of the cement led the culprits to think that the pearls might be hidden there."

Brains folded his notebook. "Now, let's see how much more of this mystery we can unravel." He continued. "We'll begin with the day Mikko's father went to the state capital. We don't positively know the reason for the trip, but I'd guess he picked up the pearls from the Alien Properties Custodian at the Federal building."

"That sounds like a good guess to me," I said.

"On his return to Crestwood Mr. Yamada asked if the banks were open," Brains continued. "So we can assume that he planned to deposit the necklace in a safe-deposit box."

I glanced at Yama. He sure looked confused. And I think I know why. He was wondering where Brains got all this info. And *gosh!* I wasn't going to tell him how *we'd* eavesdropped.

"With the bank closed, Mikko's father was in a bad spot," Brains said. "If you remember, he acted as if he thought he was being followed."

The way Brains saw it, he *was* being followed, possibly by that guy Larkin or Barkin who threatened him later on the phone.

I cut in. "If Mr. Yamada was so afraid, why'd he go for a drive?"

"I believe I know the answer to that," said X. "Mr. and Mrs. Yamada probably felt that keeping the pearls in the house was endangering the Bevanses. That drive was a mission—a journey to some place where they hid the pearls! Also we can assume the gang never found the necklace because here they are, a year later, still searching for it."

Brains was guessing, but I had a hunch he was on the beam. A trained criminal investigator knows when the pieces of a case start dropping into place.

By now Mikko was on his feet. "Brains, I didn't know about those pearls. But now that I do, I've just got to find them. It's the least I can do to repay Obii-san. My father would have wanted me to."

"Pray, do not disturb yourself, Mikko," assured Brains. "Jimmy and I will do all in our power to locate those pearls for you."

We'd forgotten all about Yama, but he spoke up now.

"No, Brains-san! I cannot permit you to be involved in this. I did not know there would be such danger in searching for pearls. I am grateful for your help, but now you and Jimmy-san must go home and forget all I have told. Leave search for pearls to me!"

That floored me! Just when the mystery turns out to be a real humdinger, we get booted off the case!

But I should have known that Brains would have an angle.

"Mr. Yama," he said. "You underestimate the difficulties in this case. The school authorities are on the alert. Should you be caught searching the school, it could mean severe punishment."

Yama made a rumbling sound of defiance.

"Allow me to refer you to section 628 of the Criminal Code," continued Brains sternly. "Illegal entry upon public property is punishable by one to five years of prison!"

Brother! That guy was a walking encyclopedia.

Yama wasn't scared, but he was thinking it over now. "But I cannot stand idly while Obii-san's pearls are stolen," protested Yama. "Something must be done!"

"And something *will* be done," said Brains in his deep official voice. "If you leave the case in our hands."

Mikko spoke up enthusiastically. "Maybe you'd better explain to Yama. He doesn't know you're private detectives."

Brains shot Mikko a look of pure horror! And Mikko just froze with his mouth still open. No-one was supposed to know we were secret operatives!

Now that the fat was in the fire there was nothing for Brains to do but come out into the open. "Mikko is quite right," he said to Yama. "Jimmy and I are criminal investigators. As a matter of fact, we have been working on this case for some days now."

Yama looked from me to Brains. If this was some kind of a joke someone had forgotten to give him the punch-line.

That's when Brains pulled out our business card and handed it to Yama. Yama read it carefully. When he looked at us again it was with new respect. *That card had done the trick!*

That's the way it is with most folks. Tell them the moon is made of green cheese and they'll give you a horse-laugh. But if you show them the same thing in *print*, they'll believe it. Or at least they'll start to wonder if it isn't true.

"Private detectives?" said Yama, shaking his head. You could see there were lots of things here in America that Yama found hard to understand.

"Let them take the case," Mikko urged. "I know they can find the pearls."

For a long minute Yama just stood there turning it over in his mind. Then, with a bow, he said, "In times of confusion it is wise to consult the omens. Wait here! I will give you my answer in a few moments."

Brains and I exchanged wondering glances.

Yama sat down at a table in the corner, opened a small drawer and took out a bamboo case. From the case he extracted a bunch of thin, polished sticks.

"Creeps!" I whispered to Mikko. "What's that all about?"

"Quiet," hissed Mikko. "He is reading the signs and omens!"

I did a double take because Yama just took up that bunch of sticks, spread them open like a fan in his hands, raised them up to the level of his face, and closed his eyes.

Suddenly I felt cold. I looked to see if the window was open, but it wasn't. That chill was from the ice-water running along my spine.

I could almost see ghostly Japanese spirits floating around the room!



In the Hour of the Dog

WHAT HAPPENED next was out of this world.

With his eyes closed, Yama split the sticks into two bundles, one in each hand. Muttering to himself, he started a weird routine of counting the sticks in little bunches. Some of them ended up clamped between his fingers. The rigmarole went on with Yama shifting and counting those sticks till I got dizzy. Then he hauled out a small book printed in Japanese and began looking something up.

He must have found it, because a minute later he turned to us. "The signs are good," he bowed. "I shall accept Mikko-san's suggestion! You may continue the search for the pearls!"

"You won't regret your decision, Mr. Yama," said Brains. "You may rely on Benton and Carson."

That's when Mikko spoke up. "What's your next step, Brains?"

Brains thought it over for a minute, then said, "Our next problem is to unmask this unknown gang. We must find out who they are and uncover their plans. I believe I know a way to smoke them out."

"Well, spill it, Brains," I said.

"We know little about this gang," said X, "except that they have a constant watch on Mr. Yama."

"*Hai*—yes! Even at the post office today, I was aware of someone watching me, Brains-san," reported Yama.

"Excellent," said Brains. "Obviously they hope that you will lead them to the necklace. I wonder what would happen if you were suddenly to find the pearls?"

"That gang would make a grab for them," I interrupted.

"Precisely!" said Brains. "And that's where we could turn the tables and nab one of the gang instead! An interrogation, with Yama's help, would force him to reveal the whereabouts of the gang."

"But we don't know where the pearls are, so how can we find them," I pointed out.

That's when Brains explained so even a bonehead like me could understand.

Yama wouldn't have to find the real pearls, but only pretend that he did. The scheme was for the big guy to slip into the school tonight and come out with a dummy necklace—a string of beads Brains' mother didn't use any more.

With luck, that mysterious gang would trail Yama as usual. He'd decoy them to a rendezvous on the outskirts of town where we'd be waiting. Yama would flash the pearls to give them an eyeful. According to the plan the gang would attack.

And that's when we'd spring the trap! If Yama could grab and hold one of those crooks we'd make him talk, and talk plenty!

"It's the craziest plan I ever heard, but what have we got to lose?" I said.

Yama was all for it. There was just one rule he laid down.

"Should there be violence, you must let me handle it."

That was all right with me . . . A guy who could move those beams from that hole in the school wall could handle any six men—and didn't need my help.

"Then we're all agreed," said Brains. "We'll go into operation tonight." He glanced at his watch. "Good grief! It's after six o'clock already. Jimmy and I have to go home for supper, and—"

"Wait a minute," interrupted Mikko. "Perhaps you could have supper with us."

Yama bowed. "I have forgotten obligations of hospitality! I would be most grateful for the honor."

Well, we had to call up our folks and get the okay on that, first. Brains had an easy time of it.

I thought I'd have to pull out all the stops to convince my folks, but my mother said she was proud of me for going out of my way to make friends with a new boy in town.

Anyway, Mom reminded me that it was Saturday night and that my sister Ann was in a Shakespeare play the Junior Theatrical Group was putting on in Bartonville. Mom and Dad were driving her over and staying to see the play. I'd find the key under the doormat when I got home.

With all that off my mind, I had time to think about supper.

"Prepare yourself for a shock," said Brains. "I believe we are going to share in a typical Japanese repast."

I didn't know what to expect, but Yama fixed a swell spread. We started off with bowls of Japanese soup. It had some stuff floating around in it that looked like crepe rubber, but tasted swell. After that we got assorted kinds of pickled vegetables and some slices of grey stuff that you dipped in sauce. It was delicious, and I told Yama so.

"It is called shashimi," said Yama, pleased.

I didn't find out till later that shashimi is *raw* fish in sauce. But I couldn't complain. I'd enjoyed it, hadn't I?

Right after the dishes were washed, Brains ducked for home. When he came back soon afterward, he was puffing like a steam engine.

"They're out there," he reported breathlessly, as he handed the fake pearls to Yama. "I saw the big black car turn into Lilac Boulevard."

I got the chills just thinking about it. Still, our plan depended on them being out there, waiting to trail Yama. So now all we had to do was wait for the zero hour.

Everything was figured to the last detail, but Yama had to make doubly sure that things would go smoothly. About five minutes before he was to leave, he hauled out that Japanese

almanac again and took a look at the clock. "The hour of the dog," he said, mumbling to himself. Then he began riffling through the pages.

"Hey! What's this hour of the dog business?" I asked Brains, as I drew him aside.

"The Japanese divide the day into twelve two-hour periods. Each of them is called by the name of some animal in the Oriental zodiac, like the ox, the tiger, and the dragon. The time from eight to ten o'clock in the evening is called the hour of the dog."

Mikko must have heard us, because he added: "Yama is consulting the signs to see if this is a good hour in which to start our mission."

Creeps! Yama wouldn't make a move without that little book. Frankly, the whole business gave me the willies!

The signs must have been favorable because Yama put the book away, straightened his jacket and prepared to leave.

Brains stopped him at the door. "One moment, Mr. Yama, we'd better check the time." They compared wrist watches.

"Remember," Brains reminded him, "you are to meet us at College Road and Poplar Street about nine-thirty. You are to spend only a short time in the school and then leave in a hurry. Act nervous and worried. It is imperative that the gang gets the impression that you have made an important find."

Yama nodded. "I understand, Brains-san." And with that he slipped out of the side door.

Brains grabbed another look at his watch. "We'll give him about half an hour to accomplish his mission, then we'll head for the rendezvous!"

Something had been buzzing around the back of my brain, and I figured now was the time to bring it up.

"Brains," I said, "what about Sabin? If he nabs Yama, it could gum up the entire plan."

"Yama has managed to elude Mr. Sabin before," said Brains. "Let's hope he can do it again tonight."

Somehow that next half hour crawled by. And then the

three of us headed out into the night toward the rendezvous.

College Road near Poplar Street is an awfully lonely place especially in the dead of night. The only lights are the street lamps on the corners. The nearest house is more than two blocks away. The rest of the area is just a lot of vacant lots and narrow sidewalks.

That's not hard to understand because right on the other side of College Road is the old Crestwood Cemetery. Who'd want to build their house anywhere near that?

"Creeps!" I said to Brains. "Couldn't you find a more cheerful spot?"

"Calm yourself, Operative Three," he said. "You must steel your nerves for what lies ahead."

Calm myself! How could I stay calm with those headstones staring me in the face.

Mikko kept looking nervously down College Road in the direction from which Yama would come. Brains was the only one who wasn't jittery. He just checked his watch from time to time.

Suddenly Brains snapped, "Here he comes!"

There in the shadows, beyond the light of the street lamp a hulking figure was hurrying in our direction. Seconds later Yama had joined us.

"Quick," commanded Brains. "Gather round! Remember Yama is supposed to be showing us his find!"

We huddled around Yama.

"Have you seen the criminals?" hissed Brains to Yama.

"A short distance behind me," whispered Yama. "They have followed me closely. They suspect something!"

"Excellent!" muttered Brains. He grabbed a look down the street and then ducked back into the huddle.

"I believe I see them," he said. "They are traveling without lights!"

I started to look, too, but Brains yanked me back. "Keep your head down!" he squeaked. "We're not supposed to know we're being watched."

I didn't have to see the car. By now I could hear the heavy throb of the motor. My heart began doing triple somersaults as I realized the gang was coming closer each second.

"Steady!" hissed Brains.

Did he say *steady*? He must be kidding! My nerves were jangling like the bell on a two-dollar alarm clock. Creeps! For all I knew the gang in that car had guns trained on us that very minute.

Suddenly Brains gave the signal! "Now, Yama! Now!"

Yama fished a paper bag out of his pocket and dumped something out of it. It was a pearl necklace!

Wow! For one crazy instant I thought those were the missing pearls! Then I remembered! They were just imitations! This was all part of our trap!

Now Yama went into the rest of his act. He let the necklace slip from his fingers and scrabbled for it wildly on the pavement. Brother, what a performance! The gang in that car must have gone pop-eyed! I could just see them itching to lay hands on those pearls.

"Okay, Yama! Take off!" snapped Brains.

The big guy stood erect. He took one look at the car and bolted in the opposite direction as if he was scared stiff and trying to make a getaway.

Instantly, the big black car picked up speed and shot past us after him. They cut him off partway down the block. In the darkness we saw several shadowy figures leap out and grapple with Yama.

I lost my head for a second. "Come on, let's help him!" I yelled.

Brains grabbed me. "Hold it, Jimmy! Yama will handle this himself! He's an expert in unarmed combat!"

And man! Brains wasn't kidding. The big guy was like a tiger fighting a band of hungry wolves. There were bodies flying all over the place. I couldn't make out too many details in the dark. I could just see tangled silhouettes of men struggling up and back across the sidewalk and the vacant lot.

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Just as I figured Yama was going to clean up the whole gang I saw one of his attackers grab something out of the car! It looked like a thick stick, but it must have been something a lot heavier than that.

Because when he swung it, Yama sagged and started to go down.

"Quick!" yelled Mikko. "We've got to help him!" He sprinted forward. Brains and I were right behind him! It was a crazy thing to do, but we were too excited to be scared.

I'm not too sure that happened next. It was all like an out-of-focus movie that keeps hopping around in front of your eyes.

Mikko jumped on some guy's shoulders and started batting him with his fist.

Brains tackled someone and came bouncing back like a rubber ball off a wall.

Me? I dove in and hit some guy low and hard. I didn't come to half his weight, but I play plenty of football. Down he came!

But just when I thought we were doing pretty well, I got belted in the stomach by an elbow. All of a sudden I lost interest in the proceedings.

By the time I was able to catch my breath, the party was breaking up. One of the gang was scooping something from the sidewalk. I couldn't see straight, but I knew they were the fake pearls. Then he ducked into the waiting car with the others and tore off into the night.

Bleary-eyed though I was, I tried to grab a look at the license plate. It was mounted upside-down; an old trick, but it worked.

I turned to see Mikko and Brains trying to help Yama to his feet. The big guy kept rubbing the back of his head where they'd clouted him. His clothes were a mess. Brains, Mikko and I weren't in much better shape.

"At least we put up a good scrap," I said, at last. "Maybe we scared them off—"

Brains looked at me as if I was something that just crawled out from the woodwork. "The purpose of tonight's operation was to capture one of the gang for interrogation," he said.

He looked off into the night and spoke with the voice of doom. "Operative Three, *our mission has failed!*"



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A Hot Lead

LET ME tell you, we all felt mighty low as we went back to the Bevanses' house to clean up.

I tried to cheer everyone up by making jokes about the big haul that gang had made—a one-dollar-ninety-eight-cent necklace—but nobody else saw the humor of it.

I expected Yama to be sore because our plan had flopped, but instead he said, "*Shikata-ga-nai!* There is nothing one can do about it! We had to fail! It was written in the signs!"

"In the signs?" said Brains.

"It is most easy to understand," explained Yama. "There were *four* of us on this mission—a most unlucky number, Brains-san."

Brains and I looked at each other. Brother! It takes all kinds. Anyway we sure were glad he didn't blame us for the fiasco.

We cleaned up as best we could and were starting to say good-bye when Mikko asked what our plans were.

"We have a few angles to try," said Brains mysteriously. "We shall inform you of developments in due course."

It was Yama who led us out. He looked badly worried.

"Brains-san," he said, "you were in great danger tonight . . ."

Brains could guess what he was going to say. He took the bull by the horns.

"We will take no unnecessary risks. However, Benton and Carson can handle any situation that should arise. I believe we demonstrated that tonight."

Boyl! He sounded as confident as a regiment of marines. We didn't wait for Yama to reply. We just left him standing there with his mouth wide open.

It was still early so we headed for the lab. When we got there, Brains took a folder from the case file and began to make notes.

"Okay, Chief, let's have it!" I said. "What are those angles we haven't tried yet?"

He stopped writing. "Angles?" he asked, puzzled.

"You heard me. You told Mikko you had some angles you wanted to try."

"Frankly, Operative Three, I was just whistling in the dark. I've developed no new plan of action."

"Then, that means we're at a dead-end again! X, we seem to be going around in circles in this case."

"Don't despair, Operative Three, you must expect a lot of spade work on a complicated case like this," said Brains, turning back to the report.

"All we've been doing is spade work," I groused. "But we haven't dug up a thing!"

Brains just ignored me and kept writing. Well, that got me! It had been a long, hard day with few results, and I guess I was pretty edgy. I went into a fast burn.

"I don't know why I even bother talking to you," I blurted. "It's all a waste of breath. I'm not more than a stick of furniture around here. Maybe I ought to hand in my resignation!"

That was when X stopped writing and handed me the folder.

"Will you kindly examine this report and sign it please, Operative Three?"

"What's all this about?" I barked suspiciously.

"It's the folder on the Case of the Moving Statue. Since the mystery is solved we can close out the case. . . . Since you were in charge of the investigation, naturally your signature is required on the final report."

Hey! That was really *something*!

I'd never signed a report before. Believe you me, I grabbed that pen quick and signed my name, real big. It sure felt good knowing the name of Jimmy Carson was going down in the history of criminology. I'd forgotten all about resigning.

And now Brains leaned back in his chair, put his fingers together and frowned. "Operative Three, you are to report as early as possible tomorrow. There's a lot of work to be done on the case."

"Hold on, X! First off, there's church in the morning, and then I promised Dad I'd use this week-end studying for my mid-terms."

"Most commendable!" said Brains. "Bring your books over here. You may tell your parents that I am helping you to prepare for the mathematics exam."

"Just a second, Brains," I said. "I don't like telling fibs to my folks."

He eyed me coldly. "I do not contemplate any deception, Operative Three. If all goes well I hope to teach you how to solve important problems by finding the unknown quantity."

I was still trying to figure out what he meant when he glanced at his watch.

"It's getting rather late, Operative Three. I suggest you return home and get a good night's sleep. If I am not mistaken, *you'll need it.*"

It was on the way home that I suddenly remembered that gang we tangled with! By now they must have found out those pearls they grabbed were fake. Who knows what those desperate characters would do to get revenge.

Creeps! For all I knew they might be tailing me right now.

Brother! I'll bet I broke a couple of Olympic records streak-

ing for home. I nearly panicked when I found the house dark—until I remembered everyone was at the play in Bartonville.

With trembling fingers I fished out the key from under the doormat and slipped into the house. Up in my room, I undressed, jumped into bed and yanked the covers over my head.

That might sound like kid stuff to you, but brother I was petrified.

Sleeping didn't come easy. Everything kept passing through my mind like a jumpy newsreel. But pretty soon the movie in my head was going slower and slower.

I guess somebody must have shut off the machine because the next thing I knew, it was morning—and there I was with my head still under the blanket!

I was hoping to get away after church but Mom insisted that I have dinner with everyone else. I wouldn't have gotten out at all if I hadn't told Dad that Brains was going to help me cram for my math exam.

X was pacing the lab when I arrived. You could see he had some important plans on the fire.

"Operative Three," he informed me, "we are going to make a survey of last night's scene of operation. With luck we may find some new evidence—a clue that might lead us to the gang."

That sounded like a smart move to me. So, a few minutes later, there we were, back on College Road. Creeps! Even in the daytime that was a lonely spot.

"Brains," I said, "we must have been crazy to try to trap that gang here. Those criminals could have massacred us all and no one would be the wiser."

X wasn't listening to me. He was going over the scene of last night's fight inch by inch.

Finding evidence wouldn't be easy. You know how it is on a vacant lot. There's all kinds of junk like paper, tin cans and other rubbish that you can't even identify. It was beginning to look like Brains wouldn't find anything, when sud-

denly he crouched down and pushed aside some weeds.

"Jimmy, look at this!" he snapped.

I looked. The fighting had left plenty of footprints dug into the earth. And right in the middle of one of those prints was a pencil.

Anyway it *had* been a pencil, until someone stepped on it. Because now it was broken in half.

"One of the gang may have dropped it during the fight," guessed Brains, as he picked up the pieces.

"Not necessarily," I argued. "That pencil may have been lying here for weeks."

"I doubt that! The point of the pencil has been just newly sharpened. The wood would be dark and weathered if the pencil had been lying here for any length of time."

"Hey! That's using the old noggin, X," I said.

But we didn't dream what a hot clue we had until we fitted both pieces together and saw what was printed on the pencil. It read: EDGEWOOD MOTEL.

"Edgewood Motel!" I snapped my fingers. "Brains, I know the place! We passed it a few weeks ago when my folks were driving back from Middlebury. It's about four miles north of town."

"Excellent!" said Brains, his eyes glinting. "Operative Three, I believe a reconnaissance of the Edgewood Motel is in order."

A minute later we were racing our bikes up College Road. At Washington Avenue we turned left and headed out of town. As Crestwood disappeared behind us my every nerve jangled with tension.

Call it a sixth sense, call it intuition—somehow I had the shivery feeling this case was about to break wide open!



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Hideout

WE WERE about two miles out of town when I began to have some second thoughts about this mission.

"Brains, we're taking a big gamble," I pointed out. "Suppose that crooked bunch is holed up at the Edgewood Motel! If they ever spotted us it would be curtains, sure!"

Brains nodded cheerfully. "Quite true, Operative Three. But as private investigators we've faced tough situations before. May I remind you that danger is our business."

Yes, sir, old Hawkshaw Benton was on the trail and nothing was going to stop him. So, what could I do?

I'll tell you what I *should* have done. If I had the mind of a half-wit I'd have turned my bike around and beat it for home. But how could I quit now—when the case was breaking wide open?

It's all wooded, rolling country just north of Crestwood, and the highway to Middlebury makes a lot of twists and turns. Sometimes you don't see a house for a half mile or more.

I was beginning to wonder when we'd spot our goal when suddenly we topped a rise and saw a big sign on one side of the highway. It read:

EDGEWOOD MOTEL

Thirty cabins

Free Radio and TV

Brains turned his bike off the road. I stopped beside him. Below us was the motor court, set back in the woods about fifty yards from the highway.

"We'll leave our bikes here and make an unobserved approach," X ordered.

An unobserved approach meant we'd have to crawl through the underbrush and scout the motel without being seen!

"Brains," I groaned. "I'm wearing my Sunday pants and shoes!"

Brains made a shuddering noise. "Very well, Operative Three," he said, when he recovered his self-control, "we'll have to make a direct approach. But if someone stops us we'll need a good story to cover our presence."

He thought for a minute and came up with a honey.

We were newsboys looking for new subscribers to the *Ledger*. Should we be questioned, I would haul out the subscription blanks I always carry and go into my sales routine. It was a good dodge. We'd used it before.

With that settled, we headed for the motel.

The road to the entrance was screened by trees and bushes. At the end of the road we found ourselves on a long oval court lined with cabins. They looked shabby. Some had broken windows, and all of them could have used a good paint job. You got the idea that this place didn't do much business.

"Creeps!" I said. "I wonder if anybody's staying here at all."

"I'd say at least two cabins were occupied," commented Brains.

It figured. Over on our right, toward the far end of the oval an old grey sedan was parked outside one of the cabins. Then about five cabins to the left was another automobile—a green sedan. For a minute I thought that green job looked familiar. But who would I know around here? I just forgot the whole thing.

I was wondering about our next move when X hopped off his bike and headed toward a nearby cabin, signaling me to follow. I did. The cabin bore a sign which read:

EDGEWOOD MOTEL

Office

Register here

Brains parked his bike gently against the side of the building. So did I.

"Okay, X, what's next?" I whispered.

"Take out your subscription pad," he said softly. "We're going inside the office. . . . If there's anyone in there you're to try to sell them a subscription to the *Ledger*, while I look for a lead."

Before I could object, Brains opened the office door. Inside, an old man stood at a counter talking to a grey-haired woman and trying to calm her down.

"Mr. Trask, you've been promising to fix that window for two days," she complained. "I can't get a breath of air in that cabin." She went on like that for a minute or so. Then the old guy got tired of listening.

"All *right!*" he said peevishly. "Don't get your dander up. I'll get some tools and come right over."

As the woman left the office the old guy scowled at us.

He was a grubby looking geezer who needed a shave. His sweater had a lot of stains on it.

"And what do you two kids want?" he grumbled.

Brains dug my ribs with a sharp elbow.

It was the signal to go into my sales-spiel.

Well, I'm not the star salesman of the *Ledger* for nothing. I gave this guy Trask everything I had. I told him about the local news reports, and the latest bulletins from the national wire services. Then there were the articles on home repairs, and do-it-yourself projects—

I had that sales talk memorized, so it was easy to keep my eye on Brains while I rattled it off.

While I held Trask's eye, Brains had eased over and was examining the motel register that lay open on the counter. If there was any clue on that page Brains Benton's photographic eye would record it.

"And then there's the financial section with all the stock quotations and the articles on finance," I continued, trying to hold Trask's attention. "A businessman like you just can't afford not to subscribe—"

That's when old Trask gasped and came up for air. "You're wasting your breath, sonny," he cut me off. "I'm not interested."

He leaned down behind the counter and came up with a toolbox. "Now beat it, you two. I've got lots of work to do! On your way!"

He crowded us out of the office and then headed across the court carrying that toolbox.

"Brains! Did you find any clue?" I whispered.

He nodded sharply. "Quick, get down beside your bike and pretend to be fixing the chain. I'll help you."

I followed orders. As we crouched beside our bikes Brains kept his eye on Trask. The old guy had crossed the court and was just entering a cabin on the far side—the one with the old gray shebang parked in front.

"I saw a name in the register," whispered Brains. "A Mr. Frank Borkin—"

"So what? How does that help us?"

"If you'll recall," said Brains, "according to Mrs. Bevans Mr. Yamada got a threatening call from a man named Larkin or Barkin."

"And you think this *Borkin* is the guy? Aren't you jumping to conclusions?"

"Sometimes the only way to get to a conclusion is to jump at it, Operative Three," said X sharply.

"All right, let's say he's our man," I said. "What's our next step?"

"We've got to make an on-the-spot survey of his cabin. He's in number 14 according to the register."

"Which one is that?"

Brains stuck his head around the corner of the cabin and counted them off. "The one with the green car," he said a second later.

That green car again! There was something about it that bothered me. I was trying to figure out what it was when suddenly Brains grabbed my arm and yanked me back into the weeds.

"Get down!" he snapped. "There's a car coming!"

That's when I heard it—the heavy throbbing of a powerful motor. A second later I saw the car itself—I nearly collapsed!

It was that big black job—the one that the gang used! There were three men in the car, and seated at the wheel was our old friend—the character with the dark glasses!

My stomach was in knots!

"Keep low," said Brains, breathlessly.

Keep low? Right then I was trying to make myself invisible.

The second the car passed us Brains stuck his head around the corner of the office.

"Exactly as I figured," his report drifted back. "They parked right in front of cabin 14 . . . They're getting out . . . Three of them! . . . Someone's admitting them into the cabin . . . Now the blinds are being drawn."

He turned back toward me rubbing his hands with satisfaction. "Jimmy, we've *got* them!"

"Isn't that just dandy?" I said, trying to keep my teeth from chattering. "Now, what do we do with them? Brains! Let's get out of here while we're still alive!"

"That bunch must be having a conference. This may be our golden opportunity to discover their nefarious plans. We could crack this case today!"

"If they don't crack our skulls first!" I wailed. "It's just plain suicide to go near that cabin. If they ever spot us, we're dead!"

"Nonsense," said X, impatiently. "They don't dream they're under observation. We'll be perfectly safe. Come, follow me."

With that he ducked behind the registration office. I trailed him, the butterflies in my stomach looping the loop.

I could see he was looking for a way to sneak up on Borkin's cabin. Once we got behind the first building he stopped to check the terrain.

The cottages stood on uneven ground. They were all level with the court up in front, but in the back the ground dropped away and all the buildings stood on cinderblocks, about five feet off the ground.

The space beneath the cabins was used for water pipes, and drains, and for storing stuff like old oil stoves, empty barrels and other cast-off junk.

Though the woods came right up to the cabins, we spotted a rough path that circled the buildings. Old Trask probably used it to service the drains and water pipes . . . But that path proved to be just what Brains was looking for.

Beckoning me to follow, Brains began to tiptoe down the weedy trail. I grabbed him.

"Listen, you lunatic," I breathed hoarsely. "Suppose someone looks out of one of these cabins and spots us?"

"Don't you think I checked the register," came his answering whisper. "Only the two cabins are occupied."

With that he began cat-footing down the pathway again. I trailed him, wondering why I ever let him drag me into these crazy scrapes.

I counted the cabins as we passed them, my heart pumping faster the closer we got to our goal. When we came to number 13 I clutched Brains' arm.

"For Pete's sake! Are you going to go right up and knock at the door?" I hissed.

Brains scowled and put his lips against my ear. "Are you a detective or a mouse?" he muttered furiously. "We've got to get close if we expect to eavesdrop."

Suffering cats! I'd just as soon eavesdrop on a nest of rattlesnakes!

But there was no stopping X now. He was ducking past the open space toward cabin 14. I followed him, but I'll never know why.

We ended up under the back windows of Borkin's cabin. Luck was with us. Cigarette and cigar smoke was drifting out of the open window, and we could hear several voices talking.

One of them was laying down the law.

"Those kids and that Yama character made monkeys out of you. How did you ever let them trick you with those dime-store pearls? They smoked you out like a bunch of amateurs."

I thought there was something familiar about the voice—but I couldn't be sure.

A second man answered. I recognized the rasping voice of the guy with the dark glasses. "Don't hand us that, Borkin. You had a chance to grab that necklace from Yamada last year and you flubbed it. Talk about amateurs!"

"Don't be a fool, Louie. I still don't see how I missed," said the one called Borkin. "We followed the Yamada car from the minute it left the house. I'm dead sure they had the necklace with them, too. It wasn't my fault we lost them in that blasted fog. The minute we spotted them again, I tried to stop them—That's when they ran off the road!"

"Yeah," interrupted the one called Louie, "But that was a half hour later and by that time they'd gotten rid of the necklace!"

Brains and I exchanged scared looks. Creeps! This stuff was dynamite! But the icy, calm way in which that guy Borkin admitted it all froze me to the marrow.

"But that's all water over the dam," a high pitched voice interrupted. "Right now our job is to find those pearls—and we'd better find them fast or that Yama guy and those snoopy kids will get to them first!"

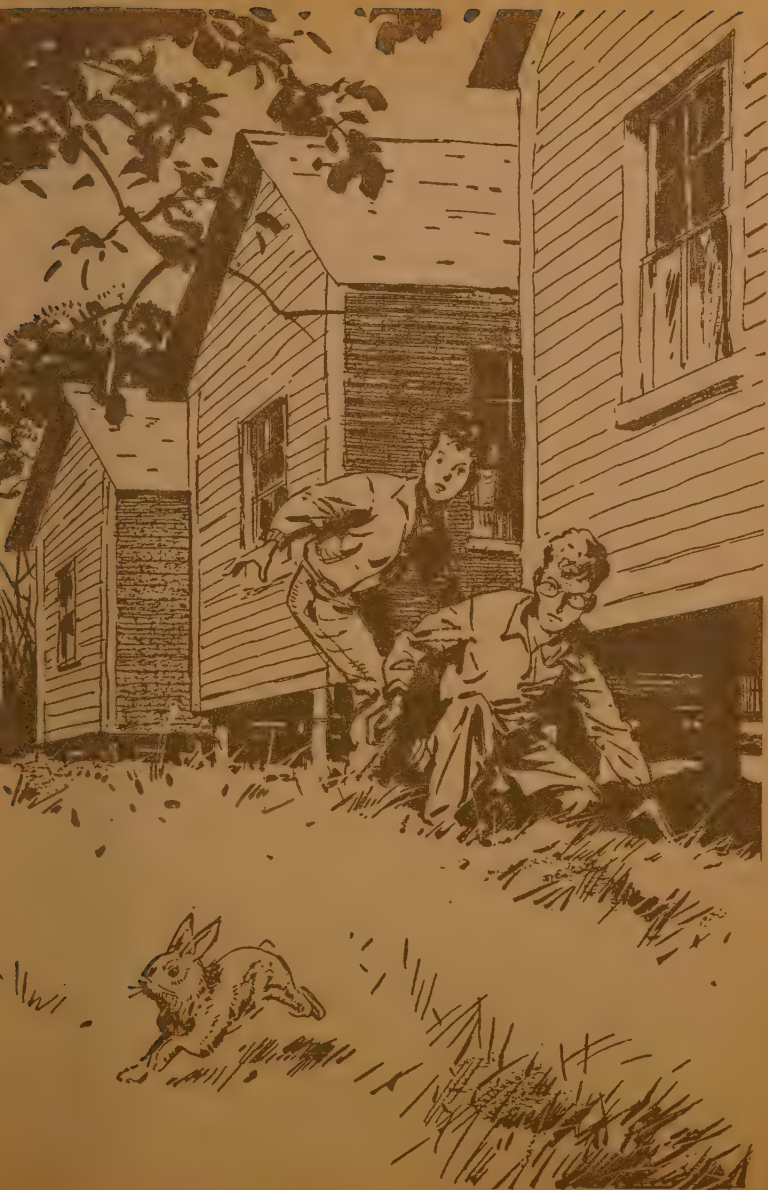
"I tell you that necklace is somewhere in that school," Borkin cut in, "or Yama wouldn't be prowling around in there so much . . . And what's more, you should have found it by now. So, get the lead out . . . You've a clear field and nobody's going to bother you while you search."

Brains looked at me with a tight smile.

Brother, we were getting an earful. In another minute we'd have enough evidence to wrap up this case.

But right then the roof fell in!

Remember me telling you how the space under those cot-



tages was cluttered with junk? Well, what we didn't know was that the junk beneath Borkin's cabin was the hideout for a rabbit.

That bunny must have thought we were after him, because just then he scuttled past us and out onto the path.

Man! A saber-toothed tiger couldn't have startled me more. I started to yell, then choked it back! But it came out a kind of whistle!

That was enough! There was a dead silence in the cabin overhead. In another second the gang would be at the window!

Our goose was cooked!



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Suspicious Circumstances

BROTHER! Were we on the hot spot! I was stupefied with panic. But lucky for me Brains was on the ball. With one frantic movement he yanked me down under the cottage.

I heard the floor creak menacingly overhead as footsteps approached the window. I don't know what would have happened next, but just at that minute friend bunny scampered across the last bit of open space and into the woods.

Talk about luck!

The guy at the window said something that was followed by a burst of laughter. They must have figured it was the rabbit that made the racket.

Brains and I exchanged a look of relief! We'd made it! But I'd be twitching for a week!

Someone threw a cigar stub out of the window. It landed close enough for us to see the "GOLD CROWN, Havana" label.

Then Borkin started talking again. "Okay boys, I've got to leave. I've got a deal cooking in Capital City. So let's break this up!" The sound of scraping chairs told us the pow-wow was over.

I figured we'd play safe and stay put under the cabin until that gang left.

But Brains had different ideas. Before I could stop him he had slipped out into the open.

I nearly fainted! Borkin's bunch would spot him, sure!

But I had underestimated X as usual. That red-headed hawkshaw had spotted a clump of weeds in the open space between Borkin's cottage and number 13. And at that very moment X was lying behind it, getting a worm's-eye view of the gang as they emerged from the cabin.

Then suddenly it hit me. Was I or was I not a partner in Benton and Carson? How could I let Brains take a chance like that on his own? How chicken can you get? I asked myself.

Before my better judgement could answer I had slipped out into the weeds beside Brains.

What do you know? It was like old home week!

I recognized the guy with the dark glasses. By now I knew his name was Louie. Then, there was the wiry runt we'd spotted spying on the Bevanses' house, the very first day of the case. From the conversation going on we understood his name was Flint.

After that came a third man with the shoulders of a gorilla and a face like a shaved ape. I wouldn't have known his name at all except that when Louie and Flint climbed into the black car, Louie called, "Come on, Croaker! We haven't got all day."

They all piled in and took off, but not before Brains recorded the rest of that license plate on my subscription pad.

That left the green car. I figured the guy who'd come out now would be Borkin.

We heard footsteps in the cabin, then someone closed the door up front and locked it. A man came past the corner of the cabin and stepped into the green car. Brains and I took one look at him and nearly flipped!

So help me—It was *Frank Mace*, the reporter from the *Capital Observer*! The guy who'd interviewed Mikko a few days back.

We were still lying there gaping as Mace took off. Brains barely collected himself in time to copy down the license number of the green car.

"Holy cow! No wonder that green car looked so familiar to me!" I breathed hoarsely.

"My very thoughts!" muttered Brains. "But what was Mace doing here?"

"And what about that Borkin?" I hissed. "Did you see him come out?"

Brains didn't answer. He just got up and cat-footed around to the front of the cabin. I was right behind him. The window shades were up now. For a long second Brains peered inside.

"Nobody's there," he reported. "This Borkin must have left!"

"Creeps! We never got a look at him!" I said. "He probably slipped away while we were watching the others."

Brains didn't comment at all. He just ducked around to the back of the cabin and beckoned me to follow. I did. We trotted back along the path toward our hidden bikes. Moments later Benton and Carson were high-tailing it back toward Crestwood.

"I still don't see how we missed Borkin," I said, as we rolled homeward. "And what was Mace doing there?"

"Hey!" I got a sudden idea. "Maybe Mace is on some newspaper assignment, working inside Borkin's gang and planning to expose them later. What do you think, XP?"

But Brains just pedaled silently. I could see his thinking machine was going on all eight cylinders, so I clammed up!

Back at the lab Brains took out a folder and began to record the details of the mission.

When he finished I grinned, "Well, we did it, X. We finally tracked down that gang."

"Finding that gang raises as many problems as it solves. For instance, we don't know how Frank Mace ties in with this gang."

Brains frowned as he paced the lab.

"Then, there's Borkin. We never got a look at him. But what troubles me most is something he said. He told his henchmen they could search the school freely, because they had a clear field. What could he mean by that?"

"Search me," I shrugged.

Brains whipped around and pointed an accusing finger at me.

"Jimmy, we're not trying hard enough! This Borkin is a most cunning, treacherous criminal. Unless we find the necklace in short order he may snatch it from under our very noses! The reputation of Benton and Carson is at stake!"

I had a sudden idea. "X, suppose we tell the police what we overheard about the death of Mr. Yamada," I said brightly. "Chief Hadley would round them up in nothing flat. Then we could look for the pearls at our leisure."

Brains glanced at me as if I ought to be cutting out paper dolls.

"Operative Three, you constantly surprise me. Would Chief Hadley arrest Borkin and his gang on hearsay evidence gathered by Benton and Carson?"

I saw his point. To Chief Hadley of the Crestwood police Brains and I were just a couple of pesky kids playing at being detectives. We'd made him look silly more than once and that didn't make him any fonder of us.

"All we would accomplish would be to put Borkin on guard," Brains continued. "Besides, Hadley might start an official search for the pearls, and with trained operatives already on the case, the police would only be in the way."

"I'm in complete agreement, X," I said, importantly. "Then, the next thing on our schedule is to find the pearls."

"Wrong," said Brains, with amusement. "The next thing we do is *study math*."

Holy cow! I'd clean forgotten tomorrow's math mid-term!

"All right, Jimmy, let's crack that math text and start a review," commanded Brains. Creeps! He sounded just like Mr. Cummings, my math teacher.

Studying math with Brains wasn't bad. He made it sound like a kind of game.

"Doing an algebra problem is like solving a case," he told me. "All you have to do is juggle the clues until you find the unknown quantity."

After a while it sort of rubbed off on me and I began to get a real boot out of solving problems.

That study session sure paid off. The next day I sailed through my mid-term with flying colors. I was one of the first to finish. When I handed in my exam to Mr. Cummings he did a double-take and leafed through my paper suspiciously.

Brother, I grinned to myself, was he due for a surprise!

Anyway Brains was waiting for me outside the room. I told him what a cinch I'd had, but he wasn't too impressed.

"Mr. Einstein," he said, "If you have any more of that brain power to spare, we have another mission to accomplish."

As we headed for the door, I said, "Where to, Chief?"

"To the *Ledger*," he replied. "We need some vital information on the case and Lew Jarman may help us obtain it."

Up at the *Ledger* office, Lew was more than glad to help. "We'll handle this one thing at a time. I'll check on this guy Mace for you first. I happen to know the city editor on the *Capital Observer*."

It took a minute or two for the call to go through. We could hear only our end of the conversation, but that was enough.

"Then, you have no reporter by the name of Mace? I see. And you never sent anyone on an assignment to Crestwood? Thanks, Ed! You've been a big help." Lew replaced the phone and looked up.

"The details are unnecessary, Lew," said Brains. "We get the

picture . . . Now about those license numbers you were going to check for us."

"I'll have to call the motor vehicle bureau in Capital City, boys," Lew replied. "It may take a while."

"Thanks Lew, Jimmy and I will be down in the morgue. We have to check on a possible suspect."

Pop Dakins let us into the file room with a grumpy nod. "I know! I know! You're working with Lew Jarman."

With an evil smile he lit up the stump of an old cigar. Creeps! It smelled as if he'd just set fire to a moldy haystack.

It didn't take long for Brains to find what he was looking for. "Here we are—a whole folder on Frank Borkin!

As Brains opened the file the first headline hit us square in the eye:

BORKIN JURY RETURNS "NOT PROVEN" VERDICT

Smuggling Charge Dismissed

That was just the beginning! There were at least a dozen other items. Friend Borkin had a record as long as the Mississippi River. He'd been mixed up in a flock of shady deals involving jewels. He'd been accused of everything from smuggling to armed robbery. But no jury had ever convicted him.

By this time the first waves of smoke from Pop Dakins' cigar had swept over us.

"Brains! Let's go! I can't take much of this!"

"In a moment," he answered impatiently. He was sifting through the file as if he was looking for something.

And then suddenly he stopped dead, a clipping in his hand.

"Jimmy! Look here!"

It was a picture of Frank Borkin. At least that was the name in the caption.

But the face was the man we knew as *Frank Macel*



Rembrandt Number One

"CREEPS!" I said. "Talk about mixups! This one takes the furlined loving cup!"

"There's no mixup at all," said Brains, as he closed the file. "Borkin pretended to be a reporter so he could extract whatever information he could from Mikko and the Bevanses. He used the name Mace as a cover-up."

"Brother, he's as crooked as a bent corkscrew," I said.

"He's a lot more than that, Jimmy," added Brains frowning. "He's a master criminal—capable of anything!"

And the way he said it gave me a crawling feeling in the pit of my stomach.

We got out then, and boy, was I relieved to escape that fuming plant. We were on the stairway when Lew came down with a slip in his hand.

"Here's your information, boys. Both those cars were registered under the name of one owner."

He didn't have to tell us the name. We were dead certain it would be Frank Borkin.

It was!

"Look, boys, I've heard about this Borkin character," said Lew anxiously. "He's pure poison! If you're tangling with him, you'd better go slow."

"Don't worry about us, Lew," replied Brains, confidently. "We'll be careful."

"Good luck, boys," said Jarman. He said it as if he expected we'd need it.

We nodded our thanks and headed into the street.

"Okay, Chief, what's next on the program?"

"A thorough search for the pearls," said Brains. "Since this is exam week we should have ample free time between tests to conduct an all out investigation of the school premises."

It sounded like a pretty good angle. For the first time in my life I was glad it was exam week.

"Here's our plan of operation," said Brains. "Neither of us has a test until tomorrow afternoon. That leaves this afternoon and tomorrow morning free. I suggest we start with an on-the-spot survey of the art department."

That made sense. As art teacher, Mr. Yamada had spent most of his time in the art room on the fourth floor.

"Sounds good to me, Chief," I said.

Brains glanced at his watch. "It is now ten to twelve," he snapped. "Take time out for lunch and meet me in front of the school at precisely ten to one."

"I'll be there on time, X," I pledged.

And I was. I met Brains outside the school. We mingled with the crowd to keep from being noticed by some busybody who might remember that we didn't have exams that day. When the bell rang we made for the stairway and headed up.

But as we hit the fourth floor landing my courage melted like butter on a hot stove.

"Brains! Suppose somebody sees us!"

"Simmer down, Operative Three," Brains said. "All examinations are taking place on the first three floors. The fourth floor will be completely deserted. However, should anyone intercept us we'll say we're looking for Miss Flemish and that we plan to join the Art Club."

I shuddered. If you knew Miss Flemish, you'd shudder too. She had taken over the art department after Mr. Yamada's death. She had a pinched face and her hair always looked like a collapsed bird's nest. She called everyone "Dear" or "My dear

boy" in a gooey voice that made you feel like you were covered with syrup.

She did a lot of painting, too—that whacky stuff that looks like blobs of paint spattered over the canvas.

Her pet project was the school Art Club and she was always trying to snare some innocent bystander into joining it. The poor kids she trapped had to spend their spare time turning out the same weird stuff Miss Flemish did—sunrises that looked like fried eggs and faces right out of one of those TV horror movies.

So now you know why I got the willies when Brains mentioned Miss Flemish.

Out in the fourth-floor corridor Brains signaled that the coast was clear!

As we slipped into the door of the art room I caught the sharp odor of fresh paint. Down in front of the room I saw a painting set up on an easel. It looked like a face—I *think*. But I wasn't quite sure. You see, I'd never seen a face with three purple eyes and an ear where the nose should be.

"Creeps!" I said. "What's that?"

"Obviously one of Miss Flemish's masterpieces," smiled Brains. "However, we're not here to cultivate our artistic tastes. If we are ever to find the missing pearls, we must start to search for them at once!"

We surveyed the room. The shelves that lined the walls were filled with paint jars, brushes, big blobs of modeling clay, and other art materials.

Behind the teacher's desk were cupboards that held all kinds of pottery, figurines, stuffed animals and birds that were used as models by the art students.

"Holy cow! Look at all that junk!" I said in despair. "Where do we begin to look?"

But Brains had a plan of operations all figured. We'd take one wall at a time. He'd start from one end and I from the other. And when we met in the center we'd know every possible hiding place was checked.

It was a good plan, but it never got a chance to get off the ground. Because an instant later, there was Miss Flemish in the doorway!

"Good afternoon, boys!" she said, in her sweet, gooey voice. She sounded just like the spider welcoming the fly. "And what are you two doing up here?"

I couldn't think of a thing to say, but thank goodness, Brains was there to answer.

"We were just admiring this painting, Miss Flemish." He pointed to that three-eyed horror up on the easel. "It is a most striking and original work of art."

Creeps! But what else could he say in a spot like that?

"You're *sweet* to say so, Barclay," replied Miss Flemish. There was a sticky kind of silence. She was still waiting for us to explain our presence.

Then, right out of the clear blue sky, Brains dropped the bomb! "We came up here to see you about joining the Art Club," he said, brightly.

I thought Miss Flemish would take off like a rocket.

"My *dear* boy! I'll be *delighted* to have you join, of course! Utterly *thrilled*!"

And what was more, she told us the happy news that we'd joined just in time. Now we'd be able to prepare something for the special art exhibit she was planning for Open School Week.

"Of course, Open School Week comes right after examinations, so you'll have to begin working at once!" she informed us.

"Splendid!" volunteered Brains, enthusiastically. "We'll have plenty of time between exams. As a matter of fact we'd like to start working the first thing tomorrow. Do you think we might use this room?"

Good gravy! The poor guy had lost his marbles! I signaled frantically, trying to flag him down. He acted as if I wasn't even there.

"Of course you can work up here," Miss Flemish gushed. "I have to proctor an exam tomorrow morning, but I'll be glad to open the door for you and start you off."

You'd think she'd given Brains the map to a gold mine. "I can't tell you how much I appreciate this, Miss Flemish," he said gratefully.

I held my temper until we were out of there and on the stairway. Then, I blew my stack!

"Of all the dumb stunts! Signing us up with that whacky art club. Do you have rocks in your head?"

"Cool your fevered brow, Operative Three," he said in quiet amusement. "I had no choice. We needed an excuse for our presence in the art room."

"But did you have to go overboard like that?" I demanded. "Why did you have to volunteer to come up here and work for the art exhibit?"

He regarded me with pity. "Operative Three, did it ever occur to you that while we're painting we'll have complete freedom to search the art room for those missing pearls?"

Yipes! All the time I was reading him the riot act he'd had the situation under complete control.

"Sorry, Brains," I said, feeling as bright as a burnt-out light bulb. "I guess I have a one track mind."

Then I suddenly remembered something important. "Hold everything, Brains," I said, "I was counting on using my free time to cram for my exams. I've got to bone up in Science and English if I'm going to pass."

Brains thought for a minute. "What we have to do right now is budget our time," he said.

We were out on the school steps by now. Right then and there he sat down, hauled out his pocket notebook and wrote a schedule for the next week.

If we had exams in the morning we'd spend the afternoon in the art room. It would be the other way around when our exams came in the afternoon. In the evenings Brains would help me study.

When everything was figured out Brains handed me my schedule! Man! I felt like the local bus to Middlebury.

"We'll have to stick to this time-table exactly," he informed

me as we headed for home. "Every minute will count!"

Brother! He wasn't kidding. The next few days were the most hectic in my life. What with studying, taking exams, handling my news route and searching for the pearls, everything started going round in dizzy circles. And I was going round in the dizziest circle of all.

It wasn't my exams that gave me trouble. Brains had taught me a couple of memory tricks that helped me come through with flying colors in English and Science.

But what really gave me the jitters was hunting for the necklace.

On that very first morning Miss Flemish had set us up with easels, paint, brushes, and a couple of smocks. "I expect great things of you boys," she twittered. "And I'll be looking in on you from time to time."

Brother, she wasn't kidding!

Let me tell you that woman had a positive talent for showing up at inconvenient moments.

There was the time Brains was running a straightened-out wire coat hanger into a stuffed owl, feeling for the pearls. He barely made it back to his easel in time. Once I was searching for the pearls in a big crock of modeling clay, when I heard Miss Flemish coming. My right arm was covered with gooey clay. I barely rolled down the sleeve of my smock in time. Luckily, she never noticed I was painting with my *left* hand!

As if things weren't hectic enough, Mikko showed up one afternoon, and caught us red-handed, searching through a lot of pottery and plaster statues in front of the room.

We couldn't fool *him* with that art student bit. That little guy knew exactly what we were doing.

"You'd better search those plaster statues thoroughly," he advised. "Sherlock Holmes handled a situation like that in the 'Case of the Six Napoleons,'" he began.

Brains groaned. It's pure murder when amateurs try to get into the act. Believe me, we hustled Mikko out of that room in a hurry.

But all our searching added up to zero. We just about took that place apart, but no pearls!

We did find one thing—and it wasn't a pearl necklace either. On Thursday morning when we came into the art department we noticed a distinct odor of cigar smoke. A minute later we located the source—a dead cigar butt left on a radiator. And wrapped around it was a paper ring which read: GOLD CROWN, Havana.

Brains stiffened. "Jimmy, does that cigar label ring a bell?"

"Like a fire alarm," I said, shivering involuntarily. My spine turned to jelly as I remembered how we got trapped under Borkin's cabin.

"At least one of the gang has been here," said Brains. "They were probably searching in this very room last night."

"But how'd they get in?" I demanded. "The school doors are all locked and Sabin's patrolling the area."

"Yama found a way, didn't he?" commented Brains. "But that's not our problem now. Our job is to find the pearls!"

"But we've searched this room thoroughly," I reminded him. "I suppose we'll have to start all over again."

"I'll do the searching, Operative Three," said Brains. "I have another assignment for you."

"What's that?" I asked eagerly.

"Pick up your brush and start painting!" He ordered. "The last time Miss Flemish came she seemed suspicious because we had accomplished so little."

Well, anything for the cause! I spent that morning slapping paint all over my canvas. When every square inch of it was covered I started on Brains' picture. By the time the day was over I had finished two more canvases. Brother! What a waste of time and material!

But Brains hadn't done any better. He'd spent the day searching for those pearls—but still no luck.

We took our science exam Friday morning and checked into the art room that afternoon. But another three hours of searching proved a waste of time.

So that was that! All we had to show for the week were six paint-smearred canvases. Three had Brains' signature and three had mine—even though they'd all been painted by me, Operative Three, alias Rembrandt Number One.

Miss Flemish checked us out at three-thirty. I was wondering what she'd think of all those botched up pictures.

Well, she didn't think much of the ones with Brains' signature. But when she saw mine she nearly flipped. According to her those smears, splatches and spatters proved I was an undiscovered genius, no less. My masterpieces were going on display during Open School Week!

Suffering cats! I wondered just when and where I could grab the next plane for Antarctica.

That night after supper I reported to headquarters. I found Brains typing away with the open case file before him. As his fingers pounded the keys he was muttering darkly to himself.

"I'm glad you're here, Operative Three," he said gloomily. "I have just finished typing a report on the case. I want you to accompany me while I deliver it to our client."

Frankly, the idea of reporting to Mikko and Yama didn't exactly fill me with eagerness, especially since there was nothing to report. The case had us up a tree. But, after all, Benton and Carson operate as a team, so I went along to face the music.

Ten minutes later, there we were punching the bell at the Bevanses' house. It was Mr. Bevans that let us in. Holy smokes! You should have seen the get-up he was wearing *this* time. He was dressed like a Turkish ambassador or something. He had on a full-dress suit and a bright-red sash around his waist. On his head he wore—so help me—a white silk turban.

But Brains and I had other things on our minds. We played it cool, as if Turkish ambassadors opened doors for us every day in the week.

Mikko was kind of blue when we found him in his room. But when Brains flashed the report he lit up like a neon sign and went down the hall to get Yama.

As they read the report, I waited for the blow-up.

Here we'd been searching for the pearls for a whole week without results! A fine pair of Sherlocks we were. Frankly, we'd be lucky if Yama didn't bounce us right out of the house.

Brother, I must have been a mind reader, because just at that minute Yama looked up from the typed sheet and let out a fierce growl.

The big guy was burned up all right, but not at us. He'd just read how we tracked down the Borkin gang.

"Brains-san," he rumbled, "you did not write where these men are hiding. You *must* tell me."

The way Yama was clenching his fists Borkin and company would be mincemeat if he could lay his hands on them.

"Patience, Mr. Yama," cautioned Brains. "Violence would only lead to your arrest. Have no fear, the criminals will be apprehended in due time. But, at this moment our most important task is to locate the missing necklace."

Yama nodded reluctantly, but you could see that right then he had his mind on that gang, and not the pearls.

"What about the art room in school?" asked Mikko. "Did you find anything?"

"Not yet," was Brains' confident reply. "But I predict that this coming week should bring some vital developments."

That seemed to satisfy Yama and Mikko for the moment. So Brains gave me the high-sign and said we had to leave to do some more work on the case.

But I knew he wanted to take off before our clients got down to brass tacks and began asking some embarrassing questions.

We were riding homeward through the night when I said, "Okay, Chief, spill it! What are these vital developments you're expecting?"

He shook his head. "I guess I was stalling again! Frankly, Jimmy, that necklace has me stumped. We've exhausted every possibility. I just don't know where to look!"

I knew what he meant. Talk about the needle in the haystack! This case had me wishing I had Aladdin's lamp.

We were on Maple Street now, and pulling up in front of my house.

"Well," said Brains, "I believe I'll go up to the lab for an hour or two. I must complete some optical experiments. I promised Mr. Shane I'd prepare an exhibit for the Science Fair he's organizing for Open School Week."

As Brains rode away I was feeling a little better. It was always a good sign when X worked on his experiments. If you've read about Sherlock Holmes you know that he always played the violin for inspiration whenever a case had him baffled. Brains was like that, too. Only instead of a violin, he used his scientific experiments to help him simmer down so he could think his way out of a muddle. I was pretty certain that before long that red-headed quiz-kid would pull a rabbit out of his hat and we'd get the ball rolling on this case again.

But that next week everything went haywire.

It was Open School Week. That's the time Horsey Peters invites all the parents down to the school to show everyone how well he runs the place.

All week long parents kept barging into our classrooms to see how their offspring were doing. And all of us got special homework assignments so we could show off to the visitors. We spent the evenings putting on a lot of special events like the Science Fair, a dramatic production and, of course, Miss Flemish's art exhibit.

As the school's best science pupil, Brains got the job of helping Mr. Shane put on the Science Fair. I was picked to act as an usher. My job was to escort visitors to the different special events each night.

You can imagine how much sleuthing Benton and Carson got to do that week. What with special homework assignments, ushering, and everything else we couldn't find a spare minute to search for the pearls.

With each day that passed, Brains got more jittery. I knew just what was wrong. When a case bogged down, X got like a caged jaguar. That gang was on his mind every waking hour.

He was worried what they were up to, and what their next move would be.

I tried to calm him. "X, that gang is in the same spot we are. For the time being they can't make a move."

"And just how did you reach that happy conclusion?" he barked.

"It's logical," I replied. "The school is open day and night this week. The doors aren't shut until 11:00 P.M. After that the night watchman takes over. That leaves Borkin hardly any time to look for the necklace."

"Your pipe dreams amuse me," said Brains. "A vicious criminal is like a hungry wolf who has scented the kill. He won't rest until he has seized his prey. We must be prepared for a bold and treacherous move."

I told myself it was a clear case of the jumping jitters, but how wrong I was! Because within twenty-four hours the criminals struck again!



CHAPTER TWENTY

The Chase

IT HAPPENED on Friday night.

All during the week Miss Flemish had been asking why my folks hadn't come to see my three masterpieces.

Creeps! Did she think I'd tell my folks about those paintings? Just the thought that my family would find out gave me the crawling horrors.

But Miss Flemish must have suspected something because

she got word to my mother. That did it! Right then my mother announced that the whole family was coming down on Friday night to see those paintings.

I pleaded with her. I told her it was all a gag. She said she was proud of me for being so modest, but since this was the beginning of my art career, wild horses couldn't keep her away from that exhibit.

My sister Ann said she just couldn't believe it. Dad looked as if he didn't *want* to believe it.

Anyway, on Friday night I reported to school in my Sunday best. Before my folks came I put in a good hour of ushering people to the Science Fair, the auditorium, or wherever they wanted to go.

I knew just about everyone that came in. A lot of them were customers on my newspaper route. So, when I saw this fellow in the gray suit and horn-rimmed glasses who looked so familiar I didn't think much of it.

Anyway, one of the other ushers took him in hand and led him upstairs. But there was something about this man in gray. I kept trying to place him. Once I nearly had it, but I got a call for my ushering services and the whole thing slipped my mind.

It was ten minutes later that my own family came. I tried to steer them toward the Science Fair, but my mother wouldn't hear of it.

"You march us right up to that art exhibit, young man! Hear?"

What could I do?

We were heading up the stairs to the fourth floor when the door to the landing swung open and there was that man in gray again—the one with the familiar face! He nodded and smiled as he passed us on the stairs.

"Who's that man, Jimmy?" my mother asked.

"Oh, I've seen him around. But I don't remember where."

I headed them into the art room. I wanted to get this over as soon as possible. And who could blame me?

The instant I opened the door I had a feeling something was wrong.

Miss Flemish had put the paintings all around the room. Lots of them had been hung across the closets, cupboards and open shelves.

But one corner of the room looked like it had been hit by a tornado. The paintings were hanging every which way and some of them had been dumped on the floor. A half dozen cupboard doors had been opened as if somebody had been searching for something.

That's when it hit me. I suddenly remembered who that stranger was. He'd shaved off that oily little mustache and put on the horn-rimmed glasses, but that man in gray was Frank Borkin!

It was Borkin, alias Mace, who'd ripped those cupboards open—and I knew why!

Quick as a flash I bolted for the door. "Excuse me, folks! Wait here! I'll be right back!"

Before they could say a word, I was out of the door, rocketing down the stairway.

I shot down those stairs in nothing flat. I tore into the main corridor. The hall was empty. Everyone was either at the Science Fair or the theatrical show. The only one in sight was the teacher at the reception desk. It was Mrs. Clopake, my English instructor—the one that has a bright little saying for every occasion.

She had one for this occasion, too. As I came rocketing down the hall she raised her finger and said. "Now, James! Remember! The more haste the less speed!" I skidded to a halt next to the desk. Out of the corner of my eye I saw that the door of the main exit was closing. I was certain someone had just gone through.

"Please," I panted. "The man who just left—how was he dressed?"

She controlled the urge to make another bright saying. "Why I believe he was dressed in a gray suit," she began.

I didn't wait for any more. I tore down the hall and shot out of the door like a guided missile.

As I hit the street I caught a glimpse of a shadowy figure along the excavation fence.

It had to be Borkin!

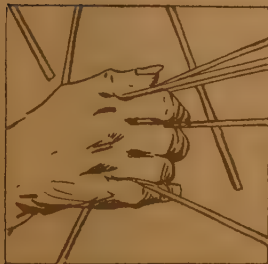
I took off after him.

He must have heard me because he started running along the excavation. I figured he'd cross the dirt road and try to lose himself in Taylor Memorial Park, but instead he ducked around the construction shack and vanished.

As I whipped around the corner after him I saw a set of parking lights a few hundred feet down the dirt road. I could have sworn I heard Borkin running for the car.

I raced after him, but as I passed the construction shack a shadowy form lurched out from behind the building. Something caught at my ankle!

I gave one short sharp yelp and went plunging down into the blackness.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Omen of Terror

I DON'T know how long I was out, but I do remember having a short wild ride on a nightmare.

I had caught up with Borkin. He was fending me off with one hand while the other held a triple strand of pearls out of my reach and I was yelling at him to let go of them.

I came to with my legs churning and a light shining in my

eyes. Somebody had me by the collar, but it wasn't Borkin. It was Mr. Sabin, the night watchman. He had his flash lantern set on the ground and he was brushing a lot of dirt off me.

"Borkin," I blurted. "He was after the pearls! Where'd he go?"

"Easy kid, you're okay now. . . . And what's all this about pearls?"

Maybe I was still wound up by the chase and shock of that fall—or maybe my brain just slipped its gears, but before I knew it, I was blurting out the story of the pearls and the Borkin gang.

It took me a couple of seconds to realize that I was blabbing my head off. I dummied up just in time to keep from giving him any real details about the dragon scroll or Benton and Carson.

But what I had told Sabin was enough to curl his hair. "You sure you didn't make this up out of your own head, kid?" He looked at me as if I was off my trolley.

I should have left it at that, but nobody likes to be tagged as a nut, so I had to try to prove what I said was true.

"Those mysterious lights in the school . . ." I said. "That was Borkin's gang searching for the pearls, don't you see?"

"Hey! Maybe you're right at that!" Sabin stopped to think it over. "Look!" he added finally. "A kid like you has no business tangling with a tough mob like that. You could have been buried alive in that slide just now. You should have told me about this business long ago."

He guided me up a plank that led to the street above. "Listen, I'll keep an eye out for this Borkin guy and if I ever see him hanging around he'll wish he was never born."

Boyl! It sure felt good to hear him say that.

"By the way, Jimmy," said Sabin, confidentially, "keep your lip buttoned about that gang sneaking into the school. That guy Peters would blame me and I'd get the heave-ho from my job."

"Don't worry about me, Mr. Sabin," I assured him. "I won't tell a soul."

"Good kid! And if there's anything new on this pearl necklace deal be sure and let me know. I'll help you out any way I can."

I thanked him for everything and took off. I still felt pretty foolish about shooting off my mouth about the pearls, but Sabin sounded like a right guy who was ready to help us in any way he could. So I decided not to worry about it.

I headed for the school on the run. I figured I'd better report back to my family before they sent out a searching party.

In the school vestibule I brushed myself clean as I could, but it didn't help much. Miss Clopake was still at the desk. Another one of her bright sayings would have been too much to bear right then, so I ducked past her and headed upstairs.

I met my folks in the fourth-floor corridor. They'd gotten tired waiting for me and were starting down.

My mother took one look at me and squealed, "Jimmy! Your new suit!"

My father scowled. "Where'd you run off to? What happened, son?"

I said the first thing that popped into my head. "It was some guy who's been giving me trouble, Dad."

"Jimmy!" scolded my mother. "Fighting! And on the night of your exhibition!"

Jeepers! She thought I'd been mixing it up with someone. I decided to let it ride. "But Mom, this was something I just had to take care of. It couldn't wait!"

That's when Dad spoke up for me. "There are some things that women just don't understand, dear," he said. "Jimmy had something to settle and he did! Just like any real boy would do!"

He put his arm around my shoulder. "You *did* settle it, son?"

"Well, the last I saw of this guy, he was still running,"

I replied honestly.

"That's my boy," Dad said proudly.

After seeing those pictures of mine I'll bet he sure was relieved to find out his son was a two-fisted, red-blooded kid.

"And now, I suggest we all go home," Dad said, starting down the stairs. "I think we've had enough art and culture for one evening." Nobody disagreed with him. We all followed him down. But when we hit the main hallway I asked if I could stay and wait for Brains.

"They're closing down the school early tonight," I told them. "And I want to help Brains carry home some of the scientific equipment he brought down to the Science Fair."

Dad didn't see anything wrong with that, especially since this was a Friday night. After I promised I wouldn't be home late, Dad, Mother and Ann took off.

I found Brains in the science lab. He'd just finished giving a lecture to a small crowd on the properties of light. As the crowd moved on to the next demonstration he caught sight of me.

He was holding some colored filters—the kind you use in photography. And when he spotted me he nearly dropped them on the floor.

"Jimmy! You look like something they dragged up from the river bottom! What happened?"

"Brother! Wait till you hear!" I said. I gave him a fast run-down on the evening's events. The only part I left out was about spilling the beans to Sabin. Brains would only get sore, and it wasn't very important anyway.

When I finished, Brains was in a fever of excitement. "I predicted something like this," he said. "Borkin is growing desperate. He is ready for any dangerous gamble to secure those pearls."

Brains began to pack his equipment into a couple of cartons.

"Jimmy, drastic action is necessary at once! You'll help me carry my equipment to the lab. After that we must proceed to confer with our clients."

"Creeps!" I protested. "It's pretty late. Can't it wait until tomorrow?"

"This is an emergency," Brains replied. "We must stop Borkin before he tries even more desperate measures. The only

way to stop him is to find the pearls. I want another look at that dragon scroll, Operative Three. It's the only clue we have to the secret of the necklace."

I had to go along with him on that, even though I hated to face Mikko and Yama. Telling them that yet another week had gone by without any real developments wouldn't be easy.

We had packed Brains' stuff, tied it to our bikes and got it over to the lab. Then we headed for the Bevanses.

It was Mrs. Bevans who met us at the door. "Barclay! And James! You're just in time to say good-by to Mikko."

"Good-by?" asked Brains, in surprise. "Why, is he going somewhere?"

For one wild minute I thought Mikko and Yama were heading back to Japan.

"We're all going to Fairfield. There's a convention of the Sons of the Pioneers," she told us. "My husband is the Grand Glorious Guide and Wagonmaster, you know."

We didn't know, but it didn't surprise us at all. By then Brains and I figured Mr. Bevans must be a member of just about every club, lodge and society in the country.

"They're having a rodeo for the children of members on Sunday, and we're taking Mikko and Yama along," continued Mrs. Bevans. "Mikko's been tense and worried lately, and perhaps this is just what he needs."

She told us Mikko and Yama were packing and we'd find them upstairs.

Yama was in Mikko's room, helping him load up a suitcase. Both of them looked pretty glum, but they brightened up when we came in.

"There is news?" asked Yama. "Have you found the pearls?"

"Not yet," said Brains. "But there have been new developments."

But Yama wasn't having any. "My young friends," he said, sadly, "you have done your best, but it is not enough."

Brains was about to interrupt when Yama took a letter from his pocket. "This morning I received a letter from the Yamada

family in Japan." He opened the letter. It was in Japanese. "Things grow more desperate for Honorable Obii-san. His wife is sick and needs hospital care. His one hope is that I find the pearls in time."

Now Yama looked directly at Brains. "Brains-san, I fear the burden of solving the case is too much for you."

I knew just what he was leading up to. Unless we found those pearls in short order he'd have to turn the case over to the police.

That's where Brains spoke up. "Mr. Yama, you're in a bad spot, and I know just how you must feel . . . I have a proposition. . . . Give us until Monday. . . . If we cannot find the pearls by then, Benton and Carson will resign from the case."

There was something sure and self-confident about Brains as he said that. I guess some of that optimism must have rubbed off on Yama because the big guy suddenly perked up.

"Brains! You've discovered a new clue?" Mikko asked excitedly.

Brains shook his head. "From the start of this case there has been only one real clue to the location of the lost necklace," Brains continued, in his best Sherlock Holmes manner. "And that is the dragon scroll. With your permission I should like to see that scroll again."

Mikko went to a drawer in his dresser, took out the painting and handed it to Brains.

"I still feel that the message on the scroll is the one key to the location of the pearls," said Brains. "Would you mind translating it for me again, Mikko?"

Taking the scroll from Brains, Mikko began to read:

"It is in the house of learning that one finds the secret of all things.

"Though words may vanish, the truth will remain."

Brains let that sink in, then he said, "We all agreed that the first line of the message could only mean the necklace is somewhere in the school. Yet a thorough search has revealed nothing!"

"Well, what's your conclusion, Brains?" I asked, wondering what he was driving at.

"Gentlemen," said Brains solemnly, "I believe that the scroll conceals another yet undiscovered clue."

Yama looked at him skeptically. You got the idea he suspected Brains was guessing.

"You two are leaving for the week-end," said Brains. "I propose that you turn over the scroll to me for a few days. A more thorough, scientific investigation may reveal the secret we are looking for."

Mikko and Yama looked at each other doubtfully. That dragon scroll was the key to the mystery. If Brains damaged or lost it the fat would be in the fire!

"It is a difficult problem," said Yama. "I must consult the oracle." He bowed and headed for the door.

He didn't have to tell us where he was going. We knew that right then Yama was flicking those weird bamboo sticks through his fingers and muttering mysterious spells to himself.

Creeps! What if those little sticks told him not to give us the scroll? Brother, where would we be?

But when Yama came back a few minutes later he said, "The signs are good! The gods of fortune will smile on us."

He handed the dragon painting to X. "Brains-san, time grows short," he said solemnly. "If the pearls are not found before we return—"

He didn't finish. He didn't have to.

"I understand," said Brains grimly. I nodded. That was it.

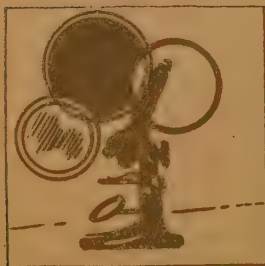
Well, now that we had what we came for, it was time to go. While Mikko returned to his packing, Yama let us out through the front door. But just before he closed the door he spoke once more.

"If honorable friends will pause for a moment, there is one thing more," He stepped outside and closed the door behind him. When he spoke again it was in a warning whisper. "For a moment—as I read the omens I thought I saw the signs of peril—*great peril!* Guard yourselves well, my friends," con-

cluded Yama, as he stepped back through the door.

"Superstition, sheer superstition!" muttered Brains.

But as we headed into the night I felt the touch of icy, unseen fingers on the back of my neck. There was a lump in my throat that wouldn't go down!



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

"Words May Vanish—"

MY TEETH were still chattering when we left Yama. But as we bicycled homeward I managed to steady down long enough to say, "Where do we go from here, Chief?"

"It's past ten o'clock," X replied. "You'd better head for home."

That was just fine with me. After Yama's mysterious warning home was just where I wanted to go.

I was about to turn off at my corner, when I suddenly remembered something. "What about that dragon scroll, Brains?" I said. "Aren't we going to examine it?"

"I may have a crack at it yet tonight," he replied, off-handedly. But if I knew Brains, he'd be up for hours.

"Call me if there are any new developments," I said.

That night I had a dozen crazy dreams about dragons, land-slides, cigar bands and pearls. I kept waking up and dropping off, but at last, it was Saturday morning.

I was hoping Brains would call before I started my collection route. But when the call didn't come through, I took off for the lab to see what was cooking.



I found Brains seated at a table staring at the painting of the dragon. Piled beside him was a stack of books. I could make out some of the titles:

SPIES AND SPYING
CODES AND CRYPTOGRAMS
THE CHEMISTRY OF INVISIBLE INKS

Brains was bleary-eyed and he looked as if he'd been up half the night. He acknowledged my arrival with a slight nod and went back to his work. I could see he didn't want to be disturbed, so I decided to poke around the lab until he was ready to talk.

The equipment that we'd brought back from the Science Fair stood unpacked on a nearby table. I began to monkey with it, trying to figure out how it worked. It looked like some gadget for projecting a beam of light. It was fitted for accepting filters of different colors.

A pile of filters was stacked near the projector. I picked up one and looked through. I got a bang out of seeing the whole lab turn red.

Just then Brains let go a sigh of despair and ran his hand through his hair as if he was about to tear it out by the roots.

"Operative Three, I'm at my wits' end," he said. "I've even had it under the microscope."

"Creeps! What did you expect to find with a microscope?"

"Don't tell me you've never heard of *Micro-dots*?" he asked, with scorn.

"Micro-dots?" I repeated foolishly.

He gave me a pitying glance. "Micro-dots are the advanced method now used by spy organizations to send secret messages. . . . By means of micro-photography a message is reduced to a tiny negative—a dot no bigger than a pin head. As part of an innocent dummy message the secret communication escapes detection until it arrives at its destination. There the message on the dot is read by means of a microscope."

I nearly flipped. "Holy hat! You mean they had one of those microscopic messages on the dragon scroll!"

"No," said Brains, dejectedly. "I examined the scroll completely. No micro-dots! No *anything!*"

He slammed his fist on the lab table. "But there's just *got* to be another clue," he insisted. "If we had an ounce of brain between us, we'd find it, Operative Threel!"

He glared at me as if I was keeping him from discovering whatever it was. "Think of it. We use the most advanced modern methods. We have the finest scientific equipment to work with—and we still can't make any headway."

Well, that got me! The way he talked you'd think he was the hottest detective in history. A hot-shot private eye who just couldn't do anything wrong!

I remembered all the times he'd ribbed me whenever I fell down on an assignment. Brother, did he need someone to take him down a peg.

"X," I said, "has it ever occurred to you that you're way off the beam on this one? The words on that scroll may not be a message at all. It could be a fake, written to mislead the crooks."

"You may be right, Jimmy," said Brains, dejectedly.

"You're darn tootin, I'm right! And while we're running in circles, Borkin and his gang could find that two-hundred-thousand-dollar necklace at any time—and that would be the finish!"

X sat there without answering.

"Look, Brains, we can't win them all." I pounded the point home. "Face up to it. We're stumped! It might be best if we resigned from the case."

"Jimmy," he said dejectedly, "resigning from this case will be the toughest thing I ever had to do. We've cracked every mystery we've tackled so far. This will be the end of our perfect record!"

He looked positively sick. All of a sudden I was kicking myself for having given him that going-over. It was like

hitting somebody when he was down. I'd never seen Brains give up on anything this way—and when you got right down to it, it was all my fault.

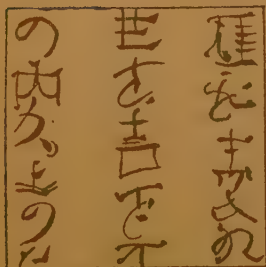
Well, I'd straighten this out in a hurry. I leaned over him and put my arm around his shoulder. "Look Brains, maybe we're not licked yet. I say we—"

And that's when it happened! I'd been holding this red filter—the one Brains had used for his optical experiment at the Science Fair. And now, talking to Brains, I'd dropped the filter on that dragon scroll.

Creeps! What I saw then sent my head spinning like crazy. "Brains!" I wheezed. "The dragon! Look at the dragon!"

The red filter had fallen across part of the dragon's body and what it did nearly made the eyes pop right out of our skulls. Under that filter all the red and yellow bumps and blotches on the dragon's skin vanished. But the green streaks and blotches turned black and popped right up at us. Those green markings formed a double line of Japanese writing!

We had found the hidden clue!



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Calamity!

BRAINS grabbed my hand, pumping it as if he were trying to get oil out of me.

"That filter, Operative Threel! How did you ever think of it?" he said admiringly. "It was a stroke of sheer genius!"

"Yeah!" I admitted. Who was I to disagree with him?

He turned back to the scroll again. "I see it all now. The real clue was in the second line of the message:

"Though words may vanish, the truth will remain." Observe how the red filter absorbs the red and yellow colors in the lettering and the painting. But the blue and green streaks come through as black. As an artist Mr. Yamada was familiar with colors. He was hoping against hope that if anything happened to him someone would decipher the message some day."

X put his hand on my shoulder. "You're a credit to our organization, Operative Three. I predict a great future for you."

I felt as if I'd been given a medal.

"Now, all we do is take the message over to Mikko and Yama and have them translate it."

"You forget." X snapped. "Mikko and Yama are out of town. They'll be gone for the entire week-end."

"Well, creeps! There's no other way to find out what it says."

Brains was hunched over the scroll looking through the filter and copying the Japanese lettering on a pad. When he finally finished, he straightened up and snapped his fingers.

"I have it," he said. "The public library has a Japanese dictionary."

"Well, what are we waiting for?" I yelled.

"Restrain your impatience, Operative Three," Brains advised me. "I haven't had my breakfast yet. . . . And you have to make your collections this morning!"

Holy cow! I'd forgotten all about that—and here it was almost ten o'clock. "So-long, Brains," I said, as I took off. "I'll be in touch with you."

Brother, did I zoom away from there! I figured if I worked fast I could finish my route early enough to meet Brains at the library.

My first stop was old Mrs. Gable on Spruce Street. After that I cut down Washington to the Vine Street garage. Mr. Cripp, the mechanic, owed me quite a bit. To my surprise he

paid up. I was just about to hop on my bike when who do I spot but Sabin, the night watchman. He was heading into the garage.

After that business on Friday night we were old friends, so I said, "Hi, Mr. Sabin, what are you doing around here? Don't tell me you're on duty?"

"Naw," he replied with a peeved scowl. "Went off duty at eight this morning and I won't be back on the job till tomorrow at six. . . . I came over here to see if Cripp had my car ready. He's doing a brake job on it."

He looked at me with a crooked grin, "By the way, son, seen any more of that Borkin guy?"

I grinned. "No, I didn't," I replied. "But don't worry. After today he won't be giving us much more trouble."

"Hey! You mean you found them pearls?" he asked, surprised.

"No, not exactly. But we're sure on our way," I chuckled.

Just remembering how we'd solved the mystery made me feel good all over. Maybe I felt a little too good, because I just couldn't keep the story bottled up.

So right then and there I told Sabin all about it. That dragon scroll was news to him. And when he heard how we uncovered the secret message with the filter he just stood there and shook his head in disbelief.

"Boy," he said at last, "the things kids know about today. I guess you're going to the cops with that info, huh?"

"Well, not yet. We've got to find out what that message says first." Then I told him about Brains going to the library for the Japanese dictionary.

He nodded. "Smart thinking son, but be careful! Keep your eyes peeled for that gang!" With that he began to walk away.

"Hey, Mr. Sabin, you forgot about your car," I called after him.

He turned. "That's right. . . . Thanks, Jimmy. You're a bright kid."

Just then Mr. Cripp came through the doorway, wiping his

hands on a greasy rag. "You here for your car, Sabin?" He jerked his thumb toward an old black shebang with a dented fender, standing on a hydraulic lift. "Just put it up there on the lift. I can't get her finished before two o'clock."

"That's okay, Cripp," was the reply. "I'll come back then." And with that Sabin vanished around the corner.

Starting out on my route again I felt a twinge of conscience. Blabbing everything I knew wasn't such a smart idea. I'd just have to swallow my enthusiasm. If word of the secret message ever leaked out and Borkin heard about it we'd be dead pigeons.

I'd hoped to handle my collections in jig time, but it was one of those mornings. Nothing went right. Mr. Ober, the baker, wouldn't pay up because he claimed I'd missed deliveries twice. Then I had to listen while Mrs. Bates complained about the editorial on the new school tax and Mr. Blankin didn't have anything less than twenty dollars, so I had to ride all over creation to get the change.

By the time I was finished it was way after twelve. I figured Brains must have gone to the library long ago. I hurried home hoping there'd be a message. I found my mother fuming. She and Ann had wanted to do some shopping and I was holding them up.

I was gulping my lunch when she remembered something. "Oh, by the way, Barclay called. He wants you to call him back."

I nearly strangled getting the rest of the food down. Then I tore out into the hall and grabbed the phone. I was afraid I'd get Mrs. Ray on the line, but fate was on my side. Brains picked up the receiver.

"Operative Threel Report to headquarters at once!" he snapped. And hung up!

I streaked out of the door. I had to get to headquarters! But *fast!*

When I got to the lab, Brains was pacing up and down like a hungry tiger. I took one look at him and nearly fainted.

He had a bruised cheek and a scrape on his chin. His jacket sleeve was nearly torn off at the shoulder.

"What happened?" I shrieked.

He turned toward me, his eyes were cold and grim. "Jimmy," he said, with icy calm, "brace yourself for the worst! *The dragon scroll has been stolen!*"



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The Ghostly Trail

I HAD to stand there for a minute to let it sink in.

"But X, how did it happen, and when?" I moaned.

"On the way to the library," said Brains. "I had the scroll and a copy of the hidden lettering with me."

"Stop stretching it out, X. What happened?"

"There were three of them," he replied. "Flint, Louie and Croaker. They grabbed me as I came down Tulip Avenue, behind the library. They must have known I had it with me. I put up a fight, but I didn't have a chance."

"But Brains," I said, "how could they know about the scroll or about you going to the library?"

"That's what I keep asking myself," he replied grimly. "Operative Three, there's a leak in our organization. Only you and I knew about the hidden message and that I was going to the library. Somebody talked!"

He looked straight into my eyes like a prosecuting attorney.

"I only told one person," I winced. "I know Mr. Sabin wouldn't tell anyone else."

"Sabin? The guard at the excavation? Pray, what made you tell *him*?" X asked with one eyebrow lifted.

There was no way out of it, so I told him about last night and how I blabbed most of what I knew to Sabin. And what I'd said to him when I met him this morning.

"Sabin!" Brains muttered. "Of course. Why didn't I think of it before? That's what Borkin meant when he said they had a free hand to search the school."

Brains turned to me. "You say you were tripped as you were chasing Borkin and that Sabin saved you from that landslide. Has it occurred to you that it may have been Sabin who tripped you in the first place?"

What was there to say—I'd said it all to Sabin!

"He probably phoned Borkin the minute he heard about the hidden message. After that it was child's play for them to way-lay me and snatch the scroll."

"If I only kept my big mouth shut!" I groaned.

He should have been ready to strangle me. Instead he just put his hand on my shoulder. "Easy does it, Jimmy," he said. "Everyone makes a slip now and then."

"A *slip*? I've wrecked the case. All Borkin has to do is get that Japanese dictionary from the library, and—"

"That won't be easy," said Brains, smiling faintly. He lifted a small book from a nearby table. "Right after they ambushed me I hurried down to the library and took out the Japanese dictionary—the only one in Crestwood! . . . By the way, all libraries in this area close after twelve on Saturdays—so, Mr. Borkin will have considerable difficulty finding another Japanese dictionary."

"Brains," I said, "We've just got to recover that dragon scroll! Look, we know where they're hiding out and—"

"We *knew*," Brains corrected me. "They'd hardly stay at the motel after Sabin reported that we knew their hideout . . . However, there's one way we can check."

He reached for the phone, asked for information and got the number of the motel. A second later he had Trask on the line.

Using his official voice Brains announced that he was from the Abernathy Biscuit Company and that he was trying to locate a salesman named Bergen, who might be stopping there.

Trask informed him that no one by that name was registered. But there'd been a fellow named Borkin, who checked out Friday night.

Brains thanked him, hung up and turned to me.

"Exactly as I predicted," he said. "Borkin has already flown the coop." He gave me the details.

"That's just great," I said. "Now we don't even know where to locate that gang."

"That may not be as difficult as you think. If I remember correctly, you reported that Sabin is to pick up his car at the Vine Street garage at two o'clock. By the way, could you give me a description of the vehicle?"

"It's an old black sedan with a dented right front fender. Hey, you mean we're going to trail him?"

"In a manner of speaking." Brains consulted his watch. "Operative Three, I want you to report to headquarters at eight o'clock tonight. And be prepared for a dangerous mission."

A dangerous mission? Creeps! I started to ask for details when suddenly I realized we were both better off if he kept it to himself. So I clammed up and got out of there.

I reported to headquarters at eight on the nose. Minutes later we were bicycling down Chestnut Drive in the darkness. At the corner of Vine Street, Brains braked to a stop under the street lamp.

"Where to now, Chief?" I asked.

"Follow the trail," he said hollowly. He pointed to a line of yellowish-white streaks in the middle of the road. He began to pedal along Vine Street. I followed him, wondering what was going on.

Suddenly I realized that the line of streaks was glowing strangely in the dark. Brains had said to follow the trail. Brother, this was the creepiest trail I ever saw.

"Good grief," I said to Brains. "What's going on here? What

made those glowing streaks and why are we following them?"

"I believe you have some acquaintance with luminous powders, Operative Three," chuckled Brains.

A little bell was ringing somewhere in the back of my head. Suddenly, I remembered that day in headquarters when Brains had scared the sawdust out of me with those spooky, glowing footprints in the dark.

"Calcium sulphide!" I snapped.

"Congratulations on your keen memory, Operative Three," said Brains. "Yes, what we're following is a trail of calcium sulphide, laid down by the right rear tire of Mr. Sabin's car."

"But how did you arrange it?"

"Elementary, my dear Operative Three. I loaded a plastic bag with a mixture of calcium sulphide and an adhesive compound. Then I took a stroll to the Vine Street garage where I found Sabin's car waiting at the curb. It was a simple matter to drop the bag in front of a rear tire. When Sabin drove away his car wheel broke the plastic bag, and the material covered the tire. You see the results before you."

I sure did. Following that ghostly trail in the night gave me the willies.

"Creeps!" I said. "Where's this supposed to lead us?"

"I'm not sure," said Brains. "But if Sabin is part of that gang these tracks may lead us right to Borkin's new hideout."

It didn't take long to realize those luminous tire marks were leading us toward River Street, and the more unsavory part of town.

The street lights were further apart now. Soon there were blocks without lighting at all, and that luminous trail was getting fainter, too. I was hoping it would vanish all together. Then we could go home and forget it.

And vanish it did, on a poorly lit corner a block from the river.

"Well," I said enthusiastically. "It looks like we lost the trail."

"You're wrong, Operative Three. Look down that next block," Brains directed.

I looked. Part way down the block I could make out a battered black sedan parked just outside the fence of a ramshackle house.

"It's Sabin's car," said Brains, as he pedaled toward it.

"How can you be sure?" I whispered hoarsely.

He didn't have to answer. Parked in front of the old shebang was Borkin's green sedan, and in front of that was the big black car that Louie usually drove.

I don't know what Brains' plans were right then, but it didn't matter, because at the next instant, some animal let go with a growling roar that nearly lifted the hair off my head. It sounded like feeding time at the zoo.

I think it was a dog, but it sounded like a cageful of lions. He was chained up somewhere in the yard of that ramshackle house.

"Come on," I said, "let's beat it before that dog comes after us." I glanced at the old house. "And brings the house with him." I added.

"Hold on," Brains said hopefully. "Maybe . . ."

There were no maybes about it. In the next second we heard voices bellowing from the house. Brains didn't wait for any more. He took off at jet speed and I was crowding him hard.

Behind us we heard a door slam open. There were more voices now and one of them was definitely Borkin. We couldn't make out what they were saying. We were too far away and traveling too fast.

Brother! We nearly melted our tires getting back to the lab.

Brains threw himself into a chair. "Jimmy, we are in a desperate situation. Once Borkin finds a way of translating the message he can pick up the pearls at his leisure," he pounded on his desk. "If only I had made an extra copy of that hidden message."

I guess he was pretty sore because that pounding knocked a pad of paper to the floor. Brains was picking it up when he stopped abruptly and stared at it.

"Jimmy," he said, in a strangled voice. "I've got something."

"Got what?" I asked.

"Here," said Brains, handing me the pad. "Tilt it toward the light from my desk lamp!"

Creeps! What was he driving at? I did what he told me, and then suddenly I grinned from ear to ear.

As the light from the lamp spilled along the pad I could make out the distinct marks of Japanese lettering dug into the paper.

"My pencil!" said Brains, "I must have been pressing hard with it when I made the copy of the hidden message. The sharp point made a distinct impression on the paper sheet beneath."

With his eyes on the shadowy lettering and his tongue bulging his cheek he began to rub a pencil across the indentations on the page. At last he straightened up!

"I believe I have it, Operative Three," he said triumphantly. "Now, hand me that Japanese dictionary!"

He didn't have to tell me twice. As he opened the book I held my breath. Brains began to read the instructions at the beginning of the book. He was half way through when he started muttering to himself.

Something was wrong! Terribly wrong!

Brains turned to me with the sick expression of a chicken that had just laid a square egg.

"Jimmy," he said, "this dictionary is no help at all."

"For Pete's sake, why *not*? It's a *Japanese* dictionary, isn't it?"

"Quite right. But it can only help one read *printed* Japanese. The lettering in the scroll is in Japanese *script*!"

"Well, what's the difference?" I exploded.

"The same as the difference between your handwriting and the printed words on a page." He showed me the lettering in the dictionary, and then the lettering on the pad. There was a world of difference, I could see that right off.

Brother, we didn't have a prayer of translating that message. The secret of the scroll was still a secret!



Countdown to Danger

"WHAT DO we do now?" I groaned.

Brains' answer was blunt. "We wait for Mikko and Yama to return—and pray that they come in time!"

"But we can't just sit around. Suppose Borkin gets that hidden message translated—"

Brains frowned. "I don't think there's much chance of that. Even if he finds a Japanese dictionary it won't help him any more than it helped us."

Brains stood up. "Brace up, Operative Three! All is not lost! Yama and Mikko will be back tomorrow. I suggest you go home and try to get some sleep."

I figured I'd be up most of the night worrying about the case, but all that sleep I'd missed lately finally caught up with me. I dropped off as soon as I hit the sack.

I must have slept pretty hard too, because that night a spring storm hit Crestwood, thunder, lightning and the works. But I never heard anything until morning.

Down at breakfast, my dad had the news broadcast on. I heard the announcer giving details of the storm damage. He was rattling off some of the towns that had been hard hit, when I caught the name of Fairfield!

Right then I perked up my ears!

Fairfield was where Mikko and Yama had gone to see that rodeo. Remembering about Mikko started me thinking about

the case again. I just couldn't get the blamed thing off my mind. My poor brains kept juggling the clues and the evidence round and round like a machine that someone had forgotten to turn off.

Right after lunch a phone call from Brains snapped me out of it. "Operative Three, report to headquarters at once!" he barked, and hung up.

He didn't have to say any more. It was still raining outside, so I grabbed my slicker and headed for the lab.

I found Brains tinkering with his pet radio. It was an all-wave job he'd built out of a lot of scrap parts he'd picked up. It worked like a dream. He could get anything on the air from Patagonia to Singapore.

Right now he was listening to the weather broadcast.

"Creeps!" I said. "Shut off that thing and tell me what's cooking? Who wants to hear about the storm?"

"That storm may be the break we were waiting for, Operative Three," said Brains. "It did a lot of damage in the western part of the state. There's been flooding in the Fairfield area."

Right there I got the drift of it. "Brains, do you think there's a possibility—?" I said excitedly.

"There is always hope," he said, prayerfully. Suddenly he raised his hand for silence. "Quiet, please! Here comes a special news summary. We may hear something of vital importance."

And brother did we! About half way through the newscast the announcer said: "And in the city of Fairfield, last night's rain flooded out the Annual Outdoor Rodeo sponsored by the Sons of the Pioneers. Disappointed members and their children were heading homeward this morning."

Brains snapped off the radio and rubbed his hands gleefully. You'd swear he'd arranged for that cloud-burst personally.

"It's about time we got a break, Operative Three. If my guess is correct, the Bevanses may arrive in Crestwood sometime this afternoon."

"But how will we know when they get here? We've got to

contact Mikko and Yama at the earliest possible moment."

"Agreed," he nodded. "Starting at three o'clock, we'll phone the Bevanses' home at fifteen minute intervals."

Those next two hours were pure torture. We were nervous wrecks by the time three o'clock came around.

It wasn't until almost four that someone answered the Bevanses' phone. It was Mikko. He'd just arrived. We told him we were on our way over and hung up.

Seconds later we were wheeling across town to the Bevanses. The weather was clearing now and we made good time.

It was Yama who met us at the door. From the way we were worked up he knew we had big news.

"Please to come in," he said. "Mikko is unpacking in his room." Then as we passed him he muttered, "I will be there in a few moments."

As we came in I saw why Yama had whispered. The Bevanses were in the living-room relaxing after their trip.

Mr. Bevans waved a cheery hello. He was still wearing his Sons of the Pioneers uniform—a buckskin shirt and trousers. There was a coonskin cap on a nearby table. At any other time we would have stopped to stare, but right then Benton and Carson had other fish to fry. We just said a polite hello and headed upstairs.

Yama was right behind us. Seconds later Brains was briefing them on everything that happened since Friday night.

Man! I thought they'd flip when they heard about the hidden message we'd found. Then Brains told how Borkin's gang had stolen the scroll and Yama shook like a volcano about to explode. But he cooled off real fast when Brains showed him the copy of the message he'd managed to figure out.

We were almost twitching as Mikko and Yama began to read the message. If you know anything about Japanese or Chinese writing a wrong stroke or a mark set on a different angle can change the whole meaning of the word.

At last Yama raised his head. "The writing is most crude, but I believe it says:

'Fortunate is he who finds the eggs of the golden dragon.'"

Brains and I stared at each other. "Creeps! But what does that mean?" I exploded. "That doesn't tell us anything at all."

It was like solving one of those mazes. You get lost in one dead-end after another.

"The eggs of the dragon!" Brains was thinking aloud. "The meaning is clear. The words refer to the lost pearls." X turned to me. "Jimmy, there were a lot of plaster and ceramic figures in the art room. Did you happen to notice a dragon among them?"

My mind ran frantically over all the carvings, casts and statues that I'd seen. "I'm not sure, Brains. There was an awful lot of that stuff around. I just don't remember."

X frowned. "We may have overlooked it. My guess is that somewhere in that room we will find a golden dragon containing the pearls."

"There is no time to lose," rumbled Yama. "We must recover the necklace at once." He started for the door.

"But Mr. Yamal *Wait!*" called Brains. "The school is closed! You can't get in!"

"There are ways!" hinted Yama, darkly. "We cannot risk more delay." With that he turned and lumbered down the stairs.

"For pity's sake, stop him, somebody!" pleaded Brains. "He'll spoil everything!"

We raced after Yama. But we didn't have to run far. We found him at the bottom of the stairs, his path blocked by Mr. and Mrs. Bevans.

Mrs. Bevans was twisting a handkerchief, but her mouth was firm and set. Mr. Bevans wasn't a cheery, apple-cheeked man any more. His face looked grim and drawn.

"Yamal You and the boys had better come into the living room," he said. And from the look in his eyes, I knew we'd better not argue.

"There's something fishy going on in this house," Mr. Bevans began. "And I want to know what it is."

Yama bowed. "It is true, Bevans-san. There has been some difficulty, but to involve you would have been most ungrateful."

"Well, I *am* involved now. Anything that's going on in this house is my business," Mr. Bevans insisted. "Now, what's all this about pearl necklaces and dragons? Let's have it!"

We stared at each other pop-eyed. Creeps! How did he ever find out?

Mr. Bevans realized what was bothering us. "No, I didn't snoop boys. I just happened to be sitting under that grating." He pointed up toward a metal screen set in the wall.

Yipes! The hot-air register! Just last week we'd used it to listen in on the Bevanses. Now the tables had been turned.

Well, someone had to say something, so Brains took over. "Mr. Bevans, you have every right to know exactly what's going on."

Right then and there Brains told them the story. He started with the day Mikko's parents were killed, and led them through all the twists and turns in the mystery of the missing pearls. And ended up telling them about the secret message on the dragon scroll.

As Brains told the story Mrs. Bevans kept biting her lips and catching her breath. A couple of times I thought she was going to faint.

Mr. Bevans just kept passing his hand across his brow as if he was trying to brush away the confusion.

When Brains finished, Mr. Bevans sat there silently for a minute. At last he spoke. "Boys, this is the wildest yarn I ever heard, but I believe it's true. No one in his right mind could have *invented* anything like it. But you've been taking some awful chances tangling with that gang of hoodlums. I won't permit you to risk your lives any more. I insist you go to the police *at once!*"

Brains turned pale. "Mr. Bevans, it would take a day to convince Police Chief Hadley that our story was on the level. And even if we do convince him, he'll find a hundred reasons to go slow on the case."

Mr. Bevans had to agree. "You are right, my boy. Chief Hadley is rather unimaginative. And right now every second counts!"

Suddenly he brightened up. "I have it! Mel Frazer—the District Attorney!" He grabbed for the phone and started to dial. "He's a lodge brother of mine in the B.P.O.L., you know."

I didn't have any idea what the B.P.O.L. was, but Bevans said it as if it was the best recommendation in the world. When Mr. Bevans hung up he said Frazer was a sharp cookie and that he'd go right into action.

He did, too. Frazer pulled up before the house exactly twenty minutes later.

Mr. Bevans introduced everybody. Mr. Frazer had heard of Benton and Carson and he praised us for the cases we'd cracked. I liked him right off.

Then we went all over the whole story again from beginning to end while Frazer took notes. He didn't find it easy to swallow. He asked us a lot of mighty sharp questions, especially about Borkin. You could see he knew plenty about that character that he wasn't telling us.

When the questioning was over Frazer closed his notebook, and picked up Brains' copy of the hidden message.

"The eggs of the golden dragon," he mused. "Well, this message may lead us to the lost necklace at that . . . But it won't help us nab Borkin and Company. We can't arrest him on the testimony of a couple of boys playing private-eye."

Brains started to turn red, but Frazer apologized on the spot. "I didn't mean it that way, Benton," he said, man to man. "But that's just the way a jury would look at it."

Brains nodded. "I must admit you're right, sir . . . May I make a suggestion? . . . I have a plan to decoy Borkin and his gang into a spot where we could catch them red-handed."

Frazer blinked. "All right, Benton," he said at last, "let's have it!"

Brains' plan was simple. At six o'clock I was to ride past the excavation. By then friend Sabin would be on duty. Naturally

I'd stop to tell him the latest information about the secret message. At this point, Yama let go with a tigerish growl.

But Brains continued as if nothing had happened. "Jimmy would also inform Sabin that the authorities were going to search the school premises tomorrow morning for some kind of golden dragon."

Frazer brightened suddenly. "I get it! Sabin would relay the news to Borkin, and the gang would try to beat us to the punch."

"Exactly," said Brains. "If my guess is correct, Borkin and his henchmen would slip into the school tonight—and walk right into a trap."

It sounded good to me, but Frazer frowned. "You really think this plan would work, Benton?"

Brains put his hand on my shoulder. "It's up to Jimmy, here. He's the one who'll have to face Sabin and convince him."

Until that minute, the plan to trap the gang sounded pretty good to me, but all of a sudden I realized that the bait in the trap was to be none other than Operative Three.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The Trap

BUT I COULDN'T admit I was scared stiff, could I?

So I said, "Okay, Brains, it's a deal! Nothing to it!"

That's when everything swung into action. Frazer pointed out we'd have to go down to the police station and get Chief Hadley's help to set up the trap.

"Of course, you boys and Yama will have to come along," said Frazer. I gulped. Chief Hadley was not exactly an admirer of the firm of Benton and Carson.

"There won't be any danger?" asked Mrs. Bevans nervously.

"None at all," Frazer assured her. "They'll be on the sidelines, but we'll need them to identify the criminals. We want Yama along to identify the pearls if we find them."

We took off, and minutes later we were checking in at police headquarters. It was Sunday, but Chief Hadley was on duty.

As a matter of fact, Chief Hadley was on duty most of his waking hours. The best reason I could come up with for this was that he got a real bang out of bossing people around.

He wore a uniform with enough stars and gold braid for an army general staff. He greeted Frazer with a big fat smile and pumped the D.A.'s hand while his stomach bounced up and down.

Then he spotted Brains and me! Brother! He looked as if somebody just dumped a bowl of gravy in his lap.

"You two!" he sputtered. "What are you little snoopers doing here?"

"Now, now, Chief, calm down, while I explain," said Frazer.

Hadley sat there fuming while the D.A. briefed him on the details of the case. But instead of cooling off, he just got redder and redder as he realized all this criminal activity had been going on right under his nose.

When Frazer finished, Hadley was sizzling like a fish-fry. But he put on one of his big oily smiles.

"Boys, you surprise me," he said. "I thought we were such good friends. You should have come to me with that information instead of bothering Mr. Frazer. You know I'd be glad to help."

Oh yeah! He'd probably have called us a couple of hair-brained busybodies and bounced us out of his office.

Once the Chief had simmered down they made the arrangements in jig-time.

But Hadley just couldn't resist one more try at getting even

with us. "Just one thing more," he said to Frazer. "I think you ought to tell the kids' folks what's going on."

Holy smokel One word to our folks and Benton and Carson would be on the sidelines, while Hadley wrapped up the case and took all the credit for capturing the gang and finding the pearls.

But if that was Hadley's plan, Brains was way ahead of him. "Notifying our parents would be risky, Mr. Frazer," he said. "Too many people know about this operation already. One slip of the tongue might warn the criminals away from the trap."

"You've got something there, son," said Frazer. He told Hadley to forget it and get the show on the road.

Sabin was scheduled to come on duty at six o'clock. By the time he showed up a police detail was inside the school.

Out of sight, around the corner of Spruce Street, was an unmarked police car with Chief Hadley and Mr. Frazer in the front seat. Brains was in the back. A second car with Sergeant Hawkins and Officer McKeon was cruising a few blocks south of the school. They were carrying Yama and Mikko as passengers.

Mr. Frazer was directing the whole operation over the police radio. The minute the gang turned up in the school, the detail would nab them. That's when Hawkins and McKeon would get the signal to grab Sabin at the excavation.

The stage was set. Everything was rehearsed. Me? I was the star of the show.

At precisely six-thirty I hopped out of the car, got my bike, which was leaning against a nearby hydrant, and reported to Frazer for final instructions.

"Feel shaky, Jimmy?" he asked anxiously.

"It's okay, sir," I assured him. "I can handle it!" I said it, but I didn't believe it!

"Courage, Operative Threel" said Brains, from the back seat. I nodded and started pedaling down toward Washington Avenue.

I rounded the corner, heading down the long block toward

the excavation. I was past the school and halfway toward the construction shack when Sabin hailed me.

"Hey, kid! Hey there, Jimmy!" He was waving to me from the shack.

I felt the butterflies take off inside my stomach as I spotted that big gorilla. Now was the time! If I had any brains at all I'd zoom out of there like a guided missile and never stop till I hit California.

Believe me, I was trembling like a leaf, but somehow I found the courage to head toward Sabin.

It was like sticking my head in the lion's mouth. But what else could I do? I was past the point of no-return.

As I wheeled up to Sabin he had the grin of a hungry gorilla who'd just spotted a ripe bunch of bananas.

"Well, Jimmy, what's new?" he said, going into the big-buddy act. "Did you and that Benton kid ever get to figure out that Jap writing?"

As if that big lug didn't know anything about the dragon scroll being stolen.

Brother! Did I want to tell him what a dirty double-crossing crook he was!

But instead I played it real cool. I was the gabby kid who'd been vaccinated by a phonograph needle and couldn't stop talking. Right then I gave him all the inside information about how someone had grabbed the dragon scroll, and how Brains had managed to figure out the message—and how Yama had translated it.

Boy, I really acted the part of the blabbermouth to perfection. And no wonder. I'd had plenty of experience.

I had Sabin's eyes nearly popping out of his head, especially when I told him that the police were going to search the art room for a golden dragon the first thing tomorrow morning.

But the high point of the act was when I suddenly dummied up and looked scared. "Creeps, Mr. Sabin, I shouldn't have told you all this! If the gang ever gets word of that secret message they'll beat us to the golden dragon—sure!"

"Don't worry, son," he assured me heartily. "I'll keep mum. Anyway, I've got my eye on the school and nobody's going to sneak in there while I'm on the job."

I let go a sigh of relief. "Thanks a lot, Mr. Sabin. Well, I've got to go now. I'm late for supper."

As I wheeled away it suddenly hit me. I certainly was late for supper. And I'd have to face the music for it, too. But right now I had to keep my eye on Sabin.

I snapped a look over my shoulder. In the gathering darkness Sabin was heading into the shack. I saw the light go on inside. Sabin was phoning to tip off Borkin.

The trap was set!



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The Golden Dragon

I WAS GRINNING like the cat that got the cream as I returned to the unmarked car on Spruce Street.

"How'd you make out, Jimmy?" asked Frazer.

"Mission accomplished, sir!" I reported. "Benton and Carson never fail."

The commercial got a grunt out of Hadley, but Brains shot me a grin and opened the car door to let me in.

We spent the next ten minutes listening to the school detail checking with Frazer on the police radio.

"Three, two, one reporting. Nothing yet!"

"Well, it's dark now, and still no sign of that gang," Hadley grumbled. "Frazer, I'll bet these kids have us on a wild-goose

chase. They must have cooked the whole thing up in their imagination. We'll be the laughing stock of the whole town."

He was still grouching like that when the radio speaker cut in. "Three-two-one!" said a husky voice. "We have visitors!"

That was the code signal! Borkin's gang was in the school! I felt my heart pounding like a jungle drum.

Frazer clicked a switch and spoke into the mike. "Car five, four! The visitors have arrived! Pick up your man—now!"

Nobody had to tell us that was the order to Sergeant Hawkins and Officer McKeon to pick up Sabin.

That's when Frazer and Hadley left the car. The D.A. turned back for a minute and said, "You two stay put until we come for you. There could be trouble."

With that both men disappeared around the corner.

"Stay put," the D.A. had said, and that was okay with me. But X was twitching for action. He stayed in that back seat for about two seconds—then he'd had it! Brains started to get out of the car.

"Hold it!" I said. "Frazer's orders were to stay here."

X looked at me scornfully. "Operative Three, have you no pride? Benton and Carson solved this case. We deserve to be in on the finish."

"In on the finish is right. If Borkin's gang is armed it could be *our* finish!"

Brains wasn't even listening. He was racing for the corner. I lit out after him. What else could I do?

We tore around the corner of Washington Avenue. Across the street the school was wrapped in darkness. If anything was going on there you'd never know it.

But far down the block, at the other end of the excavation, I could see the flashing red light of a squad car. That meant that Sergeant Hawkins and Officer McKeon had nabbed Sabin.

"Creeps!" I panted as we ran. "I sure hope they didn't have any trouble with Sabin. Mikko and Yama were in that squad car."

Brains didn't answer. He had spotted the looming shadow of

a wide-open door in the school and was dragging me toward it.

"Quick, Operative Three, into the building! If we hurry we won't miss anything. Frazer and Hadley aren't more than seconds ahead of us!"

I don't know what Brains expected to find when we stepped inside, but when we got there everything was pitch-black darkness and silence.

"Creeps!" I whispered tensely. "Maybe Borkin and his gang never came into the building at all. Or there could have been some kind of foul-up! Brains, if they slip through our fingers now, we'll never lay hands on them."

"Quiet," breathed Brains, tensely. "I hear something!"

I clammed up! Sure enough I heard running feet somewhere high up on the stairway.

A light flashed on far overhead. We heard someone shouting on the stairway but we couldn't make out what the words were.

By now those running feet were pounding down toward us—like a herd of wild buffalos!

"Creeps!" I said. "It's a stampede! What's going on?"

The shouting was louder too. Suddenly we could understand the words.

"Stop them! Somebody stop them!" a voice was bellowing.

Brains yanked me back to one side of the stairway. "It's Borkin and the others!" he hissed. "Jimmy, we've got to stop them!"

I only half understood what he meant, but I nodded.

I craned my neck to one side trying to spot them. It was Borkin and his bunch all right. I could make them out by the red light on the next landing.

Brains was crowded against me. I could feel his muscles tense and I knew what was on his mind. If that bunch got past us they'd get away! There was only one way to stop them and nobody had to tell us what that was.

"Now!" yelled Brains. We both dived forward.

Geronimo! We hit them low and hard! And we caught them completely by surprise! One second they were winging it down

those stairs, and the next, they were a tangle of arms and legs on the floor.

"Grab someone and hold on!" squeaked Brains.

As if he had to tell me! That's all we could do. We kept grabbing at ankles and arms, at anything we could to keep those guys from getting to their feet.

I heard Borkin yell, "It's those blasted kids! Brain them!"

More feet were thundering down the stairway now. The police! If we could only hold on!

But it was too late. At that same instant the gang tore loose, stumbled to their feet and charged toward the open door.

They were almost through the door, when suddenly they seemed to hit a brick wall. Even in the half dark I recognized the massive form of Yama in the doorway.

With a bellow of pure joy he began working them over. I don't know what system he used, Sumo, judo, jujitsu or just plain mayhem, but there were crooks sailing all over the place. By the time the police came puffing down the stairway, Yama was polishing off the last of them.

Someone switched the hallway lights on. I saw Frazer, Hadley and a half dozen policemen.

"Better clamp the cuffs on them before they get away again, Hadley," said Frazer, sarcastically.

I thought that was a funny kind of remark for Frazer to make. I didn't find out until later that Hadley had charged up the stairs like a bull elephant and scared the Borkin gang into stampeding even before they walked into the trap.

As Sergeant Hawkins and the other officers dragged Borkin's gang out to a waiting paddy-wagon Frazer turned to Yama.

"A mighty lucky thing you were here to stop them, Mr. Yama," said Frazer.

Yama bowed. "Most happy to assist. However, it was estimable Brains-san and Jimmy-san who really stopped the unworthy culprits."

When he told Frazer what had happened the D.A. just shook his head and said, "Boys, you're a two-man police force by your-

selves. If I were Hadley, I'd sign you up at once."

"Thank you, sir," acknowledged Brains, "but now I believe we'd better head upstairs and search the art room for the golden dragon."

Without another word everyone headed up the stairs. Brains and I led the parade, with Yama, Mikko and the others following. Hadley and two of his men came last.

We hit that art room like a tornado. One of Hadley's men switched on the lights, then everybody and his brother began to search the clutter of statues, stuffed birds and what have you that jammed the shelves.

But no sign did we see of a golden dragon. We'd torn the room apart. Now we just stood, panting and looking at each other.

I don't know what we would have done next, but just at that moment who should charge into the room but Horsey Peters!

He flashed one look around the room and blew up! "Sheer vandalism! I never would have known what was going on if some civic-minded citizen hadn't phoned me to say my school was being invaded!"

"Keep your shirt on, Peters. We're here on police business," snorted Hadley.

Horsey looked at the Chief as if he was something that ought to be reported to the Health Department.

"I might have known you'd be mixed up in this outrage, Hadley," he began. He was about to flip his wig when Frazer cut in.

"Mr. Peters, I'm sure we can explain everything. Suppose we adjourn to your office."

What could old Horsey do, but agree? But all the way down to his office he fussed and fumed like a broken-down steam engine.

Inside his office Peters ordered Brains, Mikko and me to round up seats for everyone. I was lugging a chair across the room when I saw Brains suddenly stiffen. Then he pointed toward a corner of the room.

"Jimmy! Look!" he gasped.

I looked, and nearly fainted!

Standing on a bookcase was the statue of a dragon—a *golden dragon!*

An instant later Brains broke out of his trance and grabbed the statue.

"Mr. Frazer! I believe I've got it!" X snapped triumphantly.

The D.A. turned to look—and his eyes nearly leaped out of their sockets.

"It seems to be made of painted plaster," said Brains, examining it closely.

"Here," he added, in even greater excitement. "There must have been a hollow here in the bottom. This statue has been patched!"

Brains turned to Horsey. "Mr. Peters, would you care to explain where you got this statuette?"

Horsey frowned. "Now, let me see," he said, "It was about a year ago . . . at the end of the Spring Term, I think . . . Yes. Some students were cleaning the art room upstairs. One of them found a paper-wrapped parcel with my name on it. The parcel was brought to me. Inside, was that dragon statue and a very brief note from Mr. Yamada saying that he wanted me to have it. Naturally, I had been very fond of . . ." Horsey glanced at Mikko. ". . . of your father, Mikko, and so I've kept it ever since."

Then Horsey realized he was getting side-tracked. He drew himself up and glared at all of us, especially Chief Hadley. He was working up to an explosion. "But I fail to see the connection between all that and this . . . this *hoodlumism!*"

Before he could sputter out anything else, Brains cut him off with his deep, official-type voice. "Mr. Peters," he said, "I'm sure if we all sit down calmly and discuss . . ."

"*Calmly!*" Peters roared. "How can I be calm when this overstuffed constable and his henchmen break into my school, wreck my art department and . . . and now my students have taken to demanding that I explain my personal effects?" Horsey

reached out for the statue. "Hand that over this minute, Benton!" he snapped.

Before Brains could move a muscle, Mr. Peters snatched the golden dragon from his hands.

Or at least he *tried* to snatch it! Because the statue slipped from Peters' fingers and dropped to the floor.

In the next instant the golden dragon lay shattered into a hundred pieces.

But nobody was thinking about the dragon any more. Because there amidst the chunks of broken plaster lay a triple strand of shimmering pearls!

We'd found the necklace at last!



CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Operative Three Reporting!

FOR THE next five minutes that office was a bedlam. Everybody was talking at once.

Brains and I kept congratulating each other because Benton and Carson had done it again. Mikko kept telling us how grateful he was and how happy Obii-san would be.

Frazer was trying to explain it all to poor, confused Horsey with Chief Hadley cutting in, trying to squeeze out a little credit for himself.

The only one who wasn't saying anything was Yama. He just stood there on the sidelines holding on to the pearls like grim death. It would take an armored division to pry that necklace loose from his fingers.

After the riot died down, Chief Hadley took Mikko and Yama home. Of course, Yama was still clutching those pearls. Right after that I headed for the Benton house on my bike, with Mr. Frazer following with Brains in his car.

Brains' dad and mother were pretty sore because X was late for supper. But when Mr. Frazer explained what had happened they forgot all about being angry.

Meanwhile, I placed a call to Lew Jarman at the *Ledger*. He was over in two shakes to get our exclusive story. He had a photographer with him too, and they took a picture of Brains and me talking with the District Attorney.

Before Lew left, Frazer checked the police station and got the news that Borkin had confessed everything. What's more he even admitted having a hand in the accident that killed Mikko's parents.

This had been the first time that anything had been pinned on Frank Borkin. This time they had him, but good.

Once Mr. Frazer got off the phone, Brains' dad started to tell us how Cleopatra used to dissolve pearls in wine and drink them as a health tonic. I figured we were in for a half-hour lecture on ancient history, but just then Mrs. Benton remembered my folks had called twice earlier in the evening, trying to find out where I was.

Mr. Frazer decided maybe he'd better follow me home in his car, and talk to my folks, too.

It was a good thing he came along. Because when I got home I found everybody worried sick. I was due for a real dressing down. But by the time Mr. Frazer finished telling the story of the pearls, I was practically a national hero as far as my family was concerned.

After Mr. Frazer left, my mom fed me a late supper and topped it off with a double helping of chocolate layer cake—with ice cream. While I ate I had to go all over the story a second time for them.

It was almost midnight before we all got to sleep. The next day the excitement boiled up all over again when the *Ledger*

came out with Lew Jarman's exclusive story. The national wire services carried our story, coast to coast, under a headline that read: **YOUNG SHERLOCKS TRAP JEWEL THIEVES.**

Brains and I spent the next couple of weeks cleaning up the details of the case. We had to testify against Borkin and his gang, and our evidence helped to send them up for a good long stretch.

After the trial the pearls were turned over to Yama. The publicity about the necklace helped him get a top price for it. And a week later he was headed for Japan with a fat check that would help Obii-san start the Yamada house in business again.

The day we saw Yama off, Brains and I returned home together.

We were bicycling down Chestnut Drive. Everything was peaceful and quiet, now that the case was over. I was just thinking how much my nerves were enjoying the rest when suddenly we spotted a bird fluttering in the high grass near the base of a tree. The poor thing kept trying to take off, but couldn't make it.

"Creeps!" I said. "It's probably a nestling that fell out of the tree."

"You're way off, Jimmy," said Brains, as we braked to a stop beside the tree. "That bird's much too large for a nestling."

He went over and picked it up.

It was a pigeon! One of its wings was broken and bleeding.

"Holy smoke," I said. "I'll bet it was hurt by a hawk!"

Brains frowned. "Wrong again, Jimmy." He showed me the wound at the base of the wing. "This bird was shot!"

"Good grief!" I interjected. "Who'd want to shoot a pigeon, anyway? What reason could they have for a mean trick like that?"

"It may have been a more important reason that we imagine," Brains said. He turned the injured bird over and showed me a tiny tube tied to the bird's leg.

"It's a carrier pigeon," he said. "We can only surmise that this poor creature was carrying a message of vital importance

when some dastardly criminal shot it down in cold blood."

I knew just what he was driving at.

"Oh no! Not another case! Not now! I was just beginning to enjoy life."

Brains scowled. "Operative Three, this is an emergency. In times of crisis Benton and Carson expect every man to show complete loyalty."

Well, he had me pinned down. There was only one thing to say, so I said it.

"Operative Three reporting! Ready for duty!"





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